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ALL ROADS LEAD TO HELL

BY MALLORY STORM

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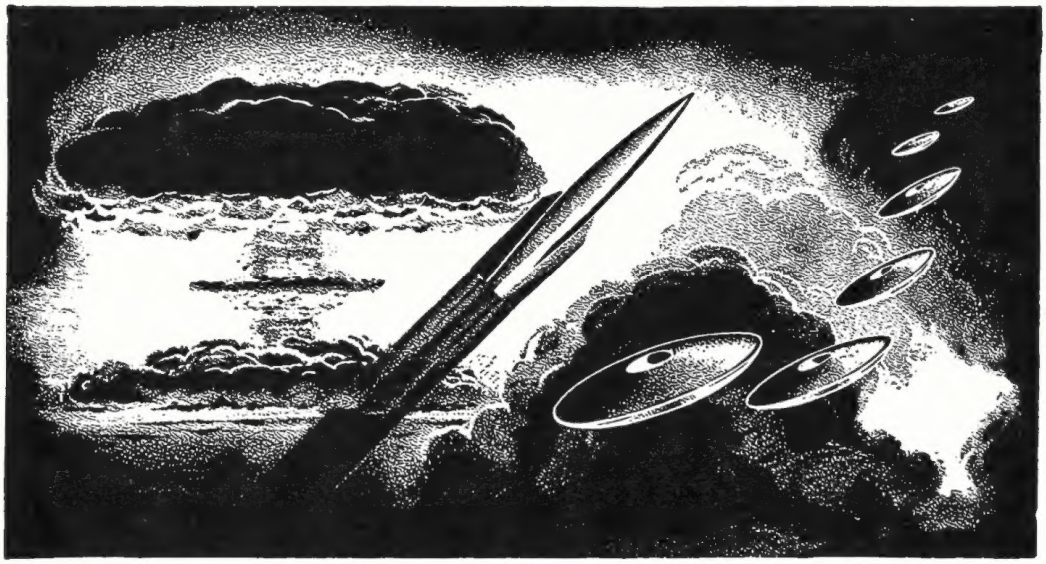

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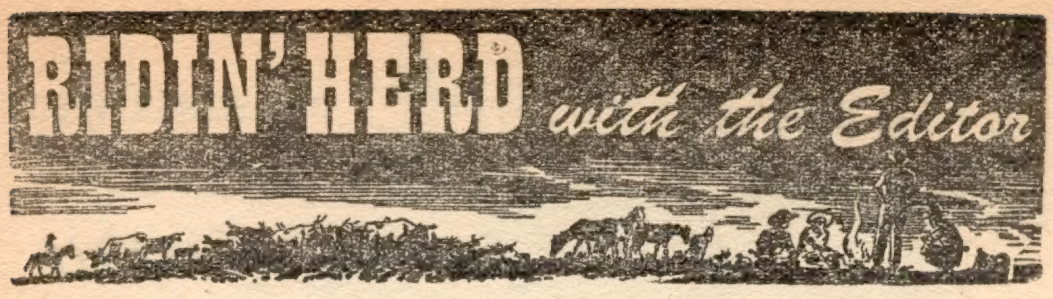

IT JUST occurred to us that cowboys form the basis of about 90 per cent of the western stories we read. And strangely enough, whenever we read or hear the word "cowboy", we automatically think of Texas. We got to wondering about this, and did a little research on the subject. We came up with the following interesting facts which we're passing along.

THE FIRST American cowboy was not—as all good Texans believe—a Texan. As a matter of fact, the California *vaquero*, our first American cowboy, had been taking his dallies on what is now United States territory, for more than eighty years before the Texas cowboy appeared on the scene. The Texas cattle industry got its start in the 1850's, but cattle-raising had been the chief, and almost only, industry in California since before the Revolutionary War.

MOST OF the early *vaqueros* were California Indians trained for their job by the *padres* of the various missions. This teaching job was no easy task. Until the Spaniards had come, the Indians had never even seen a horse or cow. But the *padres* were patient, and most of the Indians proved to be apt pupils.

NATURALLY, the first groups trained didn't develop into what we consider top cowhands. It wasn't until the third and fourth classes came along—the young lads who had learned to ride a cow pony almost as soon as they walked—that the highly skilled *vaquero* came into being. These boys had seen the routine of the ranches daily, and they had learned without knowing that they were learning, much as ranch children do today.

THE AMERICAN cowboy owes a great deal to the early California *vaquero*. Many of today's accepted practices and equipment in cattle-raising were first developed on the rough California terrain.

THE CENTER fire saddle rig is a case in point. The first *vaqueros* rode crude saddles and used hackamores instead of bridles, since both saddles and bridles were scarce in the California wilderness. In the following years, the Californians made their own saddles and bridles, modifying the Spanish designs to make them more suitable for roping. To keep the cantle and rear skirts from tilting up, the Californian ran leathers from the bow and cantle to a point below the center of the saddle where the rigging was placed. Thus, the center-fire rig was born, a saddle that is still widely used throughout the West today.

THE *VAQUERO* was a "toe rider", using a long stirrup and placing only the tip of his foot into the stirrup aperature. This style of riding is often used by parade riders today, since it results in a very graceful seat.

ROPING was developed to a high art on the California range. The *vaquero* didn't concentrate on speed, perhaps because he didn't have a watch to time himself. Instead, he specialized on long or tricky throws.

THE AVERAGE California reata was made of rawhide, and was much longer than lariats in use today. Hundred-foot reatas were not uncommon, and catches were often made at seventy-five and eighty feet. The Californians also originated the practice of weighting the loop end for increased accuracy, especially for exceptionally long throws or on windy days.

THE *RANCHEROS* encouraged sports—like capturing a grizzly bear alive, or catching a bull by its tail—among their *vaqueros*. It helped the boys blow off steam, and it cut down on the number of fights.

BUT THE days of the *vaqueros* were numbered. When the *gringo* came to California, the cattle industry began to change. Before, cattle had been raised primarily for the hides and tallow which were sold to the Yankee merchant ships. But now, the market was no longer restricted. Meat was needed to feed the ever-increasing population. Cattle-raising was taken over by the newly-arrived *Americanos*, and the colorful *vaquero* gradually faded from the scene.....LES

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DECEMBER 1950

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Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones, illustrating
a scene from "All Roads Lead to Hell"

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ALL ROADS LEAD TO HELL

He scarcely felt the pain of the blows, so great was his agony for Candy's plight

By Mallory Storm

Wate McCord was out to kill the man who had attacked Candy Thompson. But can you avenge somebody who hasn't been wronged?

WATE McCORD was a man who lived for a dream. For two long months he'd lived for it and with it. Now, rolled in his blanket under the stars, the dream was torturing him again. He writhed, muttered to himself, and clawed at the hard ground with stiff fingers. A few drops of sweat appeared on his forehead. But he slept on, reliving asleep what had once been reality....

"Let's walk out past the grove,"

Candy had said. Candy had something in her voice that always made Wate tingle inside. She was brown as a berry—Candy Thompson—with rich honey-colored hair, and a slim body as straight as a sky-line pine. Wate always felt clumsy, foolishly tongue-tied when Candy was near him.

"And that gun," she said. "Must you carry it everywhere with you? What does a Kansas farmer need of a gun all the time?"

"You know as well as I do," Wate replied. "The raiders are getting worse. They cleaned out three farms over east the other night. Took twenty-five head of horses, and burned Frank Leland's barn. They cut up Frank, so maybe he won't live. A man's even afraid to leave his place for a trip to the neighbors. . . ."

Candy was teasing him. Using her wiles becase she knew how she affected Wate. Mischievously enough, but still using them: "Are you even afraid to ride three miles to court a girl, darling? I think I'm hurt."

He reached out a clumsy hand. "You know I'd travel halfway around the world to—"

She laughed, avoided his grasp and danced away. "Leave it here in your buggy. The gun, I mean. A girl doesn't like to be made love to with a big piece of iron poking her in the ribs."

Wate grinned, put the .45 Colt under the cushion of the front seat, and followed the running Candy at an ungainly lope.

By the side of the grove, she stopped. She turned and raised her face to his. Then, she was in Wate's arms and he found that her body was trembling. They kissed each other.

Candy's voice was a choked whisper as she pressed in against Wate's big body, offered herself unreservedly to the man she loved. "Oh, Wate—darling! I want you so badly—want you so! Must we keep on waiting... waiting..."

He laughed softly, giddy with happiness. "It's only been six months, baby. After all, there are the conventions, certain motions we have to go through."

She finished bruising his lip with her sharp white teeth and said fiercely, "Conventions be damned! I love you—love you—love you—you big stupid peasant. I want to start having your children, and I don't want to waste any time!"

"WELL, NOW, if that ain't as pretty a picture as you'd ever get a chance to see."

The voice came seemingly from nowhere, to send cold shock through the bodies of the two lovers. They were jerked instantly back to the place and the time. The four men had come up quietly, all carrying six-guns that glinted in the moonlight.

The speaker towered over the other three, and as Candy broke from Wate's arms, this giant ruffian had eyes only for the girl. "As nice a filly as I've seen in miles around," he told his companions. "Tell me, any of you ever see a nicer built gal?"

The three were silent, but their appreciative grins were in evidence.

Wate came unfrozen now. He thrust Candy behind him. "What is this?" He tried to speak quietly, but his voice was a yell. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"The name's Queen—Bill Queen," the big man said, without taking his eyes from Candy. Then, he made a quick motion with his hand as he stepped forward, and his three underlings went into action.

They knew their business, these three. They converged on Wate from different directions, moving in with fist, gun butt, and boot. Wate struck

out twice, finding flesh and bone each time. But he never had a chance, because he was stunned immediately by a gun butt at the base of his skull, and then he was only half a man fighting a futile battle.

A kick in the groin doubled him up, and he lay horseshoed on the ground as another kick at the base of his spine straightened him out into writhing impotence.

But he scarcely felt the pain, so great was the agony in his mind. Consciousness remained clear and bright within him, but his body would not respond to commands from the brain; his feet and arms ignored the command: Get up and fight! Get up and fight!

So he lay helpless watching the man who called himself Queen lay hands on Candy. Here was an agony Wate would never forget. Candy had not tried to flee. Evidently she, too, had been numbed by surprise. When she did recover, it was too late.

Then, there were the things which made Wate's dream a thing of sheer horror: Queen holding Candy helpless with one great hand while his other hand explored—Candy's outraged scream as he jerked her billowing skirt high for the edification of the other three— "What'd I tell you," he laughed. "Ever see a nicer filly than that? And just ripe for—"

It was that last word that always brought Wate, trembling and sweat-soaked, out of his dream. He awoke now, to find his blanket had been kicked away and that his horse, on tether in the grass nearby, was snorting and pawing the ground.

He arose to a sitting position and laid his forehead on his knees. His voice was thick, weary, as he said, "Easy, boy. It's all right. Everything's all right."

But it was not all right for Wate McCord. After the dream came—bringing the picture of the past—he could never refrain from torturing himself in his mind. Always his memory was ready to take on where the dream stopped.

Bill Queen picking Candy up like a doll and forking her into the saddle of his horse, the big man mounting behind her. The last things Wate saw before the crushing blow of a gun-butt brought darkness were Candy's terrified eyes above the hand Queen held over her mouth—Candy's slim, naked legs kicking, twisting, fighting, but to no avail. Then came the thudding blow which sent Wate into the land of dark, smothering oblivion.

HE REMEMBERED coming to and staggering back to the Thompson farmhouse to find John Thompson bloody and insensible, with his wife crouching over him in sheer terror. The stock was gone, the barn in flames.

The raiders had passed through.

For hours, Wate, lantern in hand, searched the surrounding area expecting each moment to come upon Candy's ravished body. Dawn came, and he continued to search until he could tell the bandaged John Thompson, with entire certainty, "They took her with them. God knows what else happened, but one thing's sure: Candy is with Bill Queen, and I've been six kinds of a fool."

The Thompsons were still in a state of shock. They faced this new reality because they were alive and must face it, but it was glazed over, and they saw it as through a twisted mirror.

"Why a fool, Wate?" Jenny Thompson asked weakly. "You did your best."

"Not my best. Instead of hunting for Candy, I should have taken out after them. Now, they've vanished.

I'll find Queen, of course, but it will be too late to do Candy any good. I did the wrong thing. A man should train himself to do the right thing."

John Thompson laid a hand on Wate's shoulder and saw something that he had not seen before: The iciness in the gray eyes, the dark harsh lines around the mouth, the mask of bitterness which would remain forever. The face of a Kansas farmer turned overnight into a killer.

Jenny Thompson saw these things, too. And out of her own anguish, she found words: "Don't take it so hard, Wate. Now's the time we find the stuff we're made of, son. In times like these, a body has to live by his own strength. It isn't going to help Candy any if we go to pieces."

Wate looked at her grimly. "I'm not going to pieces, Mother Thompson. Not by a long shot."

NEXT DAY, Sheriff Warner found Wate, saddled and gunned, leading his six horses, on a line, out of his barnyard. Warner was a lean, hawk-faced man with handlebar mustaches and a sixgun worn high on his hip.

"Heard you sold out, McCord. Dumped the whole thing lock, stock and barrel?"

Wate's expression did not change. "Any word? Any sign of them?"

Warner shook his head. He seemed sad, and a trifle bewildered. "Not hide nor hair. They went south like grease through a hot horn, taking the horses and the Thompson girl with them. First case of outright kidnapping I've heard of, so I got a hunch they'll keep moving 'til maybe they hit the Nations, or some other place where they're safe."

"Even hell isn't safe for Queen," Wate said. "He can't ride a road I won't follow."

"Most roads lead to hell these days, it seems like," Warner said. "Heard the bank took over your place, Wate. Did Hawkins give you a fair price?"

"Fair enough. Sold the horses to Peterson down the road. I'm delivering them now."

"And then?"

"I'm taking a ride—a long ride."

The lawman twisted in his saddle, an uneasiness in his manner. "Son, I know you've had a hard bump, and I'm not one to throw advice around, but don't you think you ought to stay put and let the law handle this?"

"The law? What law? I haven't seen any around here lately."

Warner reddened. "You've got to give us a chance. In a way, the Civil War's still being fought out here. All these renegades and blacklegs are using unsettled times and sectional feeling as excuses to run riot. We'll get them, though. We'll put them down."

"What's that got to do with me?" Wate asked coldly.

"I know how you feel, boy, but you were doing so well. You're a farmer by nature. What chance you got down among those thieves and murderers? Why, you can't even use a gun."

"No? Maybe you'd be surprised, Sheriff. I've had a lot of time out here, and it so happens I made guns my hobby. It was just for fun when I did it, but I'm mighty glad now."

With that, Wate's right hand moved. There were four explosions of a gun fired upward at an angle from the hip. Then, the gun was holstered again almost before Warner had seen it drawn.

The sheriff stared in silence. There were four lightning rods protruding upward from the four corners of the barn. Until now, each rod had had an ornamental knob on its tip. The ornamental knobs were gone now, and

Wate was saying, "Tell Hawkins at the bank that those knobs were only decoration, anyhow. So long, sheriff. Happy hunting." And Wate McCord went down the road to the south, leading his horses behind him.

Warner watched until he was out of sight, then turned his own mount back toward town, muttering the while, "I can see his point. Losing a girl like Candy Thompson would be mighty hard to take, but he should still ought to let the law handle them things."

IN THE beginning, it had seemed both insane and maddening to Wate that he could not come upon Bill Queen in a matter of days or, at least, weeks. Then, it dawned upon him what an immense country he lived in; what tremendous stretches of land lay in all directions to an ever receding horizon. And he came to know what a tiny, antlike thing a man was, crawling across these limitless areas searching for another man. One who seemed to have utterly vanished.

No one had seen Bill Queen down there in the Nations. Criminals all, the inhabitants of that infamous strip were banded together in a league of silence. Then, the first touch of luck. A spot in the desert far out beyond law and order. A few adobes. A Mexican behind a counter on which sat several bottles and jugs.

"*Buenas dias, Senor.* You are thirsty, no? Is good wine. Good wheesky."

"I'm thirsty, yes." Wate poured whiskey into a dirty tumbler and lifted it to his lips.

The Mexican had long greasy hair that partially covered a knife-scar running livid across his forehead. He had an evil mouth full of rotten teeth, and he held out a restraining hand that almost touched Wate, but not quite.

"You have gold, *Senor?* Gold, or you do not drink. Beels, pah! Paper is of no use."

Wate lowered the glass slowly, not looking much like a Kansas farmer. His hand went across the counter, got the Mexican by the shirt-front and hauled him forward. His other hand slapped hard on either side of the dark face. Then, he hurled the man backward against the wall and watched him drip to the floor like a handful of wet mud.

"I have gold, yes," Wate told him mildly.

The Mexican smiled under Wate's cold eyes. He did not move as Wate lifted the tumbler and drained it—a fistful of raw whisky—in three gulps.

The Mexican got slowly to his feet, stepped to the counter, and stared with unblinking eyes at the hand in which Wate now held gold pieces, the number of which the Mexican could not ascertain.

Wate dropped one on the counter. The Mexican reached out, snatched it up. He pushed the whiskey container forward. "The jug, *Senor,*" he murmured, "she is yours." But his eyes did not leave Wate's closed hand.

ANOTHER GOLD piece dropped to the rough counter. Another, and another. The Mexican's eyes lit up, but he stood motionless. Then, he shrugged expressively. "There are no women here, *Senor.* That is—almost no women. Maria in the kitchen, she is fat. Americans do not like too fat women, no?"

"But there was a woman here, maybe? Slim, brown hair, and so tall?" Wate raised a palm and held it out flat to signify height.

Instantly, the Mexican changed. His

look became one of savagery, and his right arm moved with blurring speed. The knife was in his loose sleeve. It came out in a flash of silver together with the Mexican's high scream: "Feelthy *gringo!* You slap Antonio, you die!"

The knife slipped across Wate's neck, a shade too far to the left, and there was a line of crimson along his throat. He lowered his hand as the Mexican backed away abashed at his own poor aim.

Wate laid the rest of his gold coins on the counter. There was a look of triumph in his eyes as he rounded the counter and stood over the crouched and now terrified Mexican.

"Rise up, greaser," Wate ordered softly.

The Mexican came erect, pressing himself hard against the wall as he cringed from the expected blow.

"It wasn't the slap, was it?" Wate said. "There was another woman—a brown-haired woman so high. She came with a man as big as a young horse, and that man was maybe your friend?"

The Mexican said nothing.

"He gave you gold to make a tight mouth?"

The Mexican's eyes went swiftly to the right and the left as though seeking means of escape. Wate hit him squarely in the mouth with a force that cracked his head against the adobe wall and left a dent. "Enough gold to pay for that?"

The man whined and licked at the blood welling from his lips. He was down again, and Wate bent a knee and pressed it hard against his throat. "Talk, greaser," he said. "Let loose with the lingo, or the Devil will be listening to you in hell."

The Mexican held his throat muscles tight against Wate's knee. His teeth gritted, but his mouth did not open.

"I could take you out in the desert and break your back and leave you for the sun. Did Queen give you enough gold for that?"

The Mexican's throat worked and sounds came out. "I—I will talk, *Senor.*"

"That's better. Get up and have a drink."

The Mexican gulped down a tumbler of whiskey while Wate, lounging with elbows on the counter, dropped another gold piece beside the pile already there.

"You are right, *Senor.* His name was Queen. A big one. He—"

"Take it easy. Lots of time. Have another drink."

AN HOUR later, the Mexican was sprawled on the floor, holding his whiskey glass high and letting the gold pieces dribble through his fingers.

"...the most beautiful *senorita* I have ever seen, *Senor.*"

"Only the two of them—Queen and Candy. He must have dropped his gang."

"You are my friend, *Senor* McCord. Antonio's friend for all days to come. I tell you. I no lie to you."

"Where would Bill Queen go from here?"

The Mexican burped and grinned idiotically. "You and *Senor* Bill Queen—you are friends?"

"Yes," Wate said patiently. "We are friends. He waits for me in a certain town, but I am stupid and forgot the name."

The Mexican looked around slyly like a child playing a game. Then, he leaned close to Wate breathing rotten whiskey fumes. "Santa Blanca," he whispered throatily. "The Village of the White Saint. Four days to the southeast."

"I will find Queen there?"

Antonio put a finger beside his nose and leered at Wate. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. But on street in Santa Blanca is a place known as the Blue Madonna. A place of singing and dancing, *amigo,* where the women are beautiful and there are many rooms upstairs..." The Mexican's voice trailed off and his eyelids drooped. Thirty seconds later, he was snoring with the sound of a dull buzz saw.

Wate left the Mexican lying there against the wall and rode southeast. An elation tingled in his body. He'd found a lead after many weary miles of failure. He traveled steadily at a mile-eating jog. A day and a half out brought him to another adobe. The pattern of it was monotonously familiar. A sun-baked hut. A well, and some sparse green vegetation. Also, a seraped, toothless man sitting by the wall on the shady side of the adobe.

Santa Blanca? The man waved a hand southward with no change whatever in his expression. The days? Two fingers poked into the air.

Wate filled his canteens at the well. When he returned, the man's hand was pushed out, palm upward. Wate dropped a coin into it and went on his way.

He stopped early that night because he came to a small creek and his horse was entitled to a rest. He watered the animal sparingly and staked it out on bare ground for half an hour. Then, he allowed it to drink its fill and wallow luxuriously in the creek.

He fried some bacon for himself and then stretched out in his blanket under the stars. For what seemed hours, he lay wide-eyed, looking up into the darkness. In his mind, there was only one thought—Bill Queen. It had been a long trip and he had cursed the disappointments and the delays, but as things stood now, he'd been lucky. Two months out of Kansas and he was on Queen's trail. He tried not to think of Candy, steeled his mind against it. And finally, he slept.

But only to dream the same old dream.

AND NOW here he was, hugging his knees under a desert sky, with all the horror of the thing fresh again in his mind. He took a deep breath which was really a sob and stretched out wearily on the hard ground.

Then came sudden realization. Something besides the dream had awakened him this time. Hardly registering in his mind, there had been faint, faraway sounds. The sounds were louder now; the crack-crack-crack of irregular gun fire.

Wate got to his feet, reaching unconsciously for his gun belt and buckling it about his hips. Louder came the gun fire and, in the dim light of false dawn, Wate saw the light, canvas-covered wagon come hurtling toward the creek not fifty yards down. The driver of the wagon was not visible, but Wate could see that the two maddened horses were completely beyond control.

Three figures were in pursuit and were gaining steadily. One rider came close to the rear of the wagon and rose in his stirrups with a yell, preparatory to boarding the vehicle. Wate pulled his rifle from the saddle boot at his feet. His gun roared as a streak of red flame shot from the rear of the wagon.

The raider gave forth a single, high-pitched scream as the charge of the heavy gun caught him dead center in the chest and neck. As he fell from his horse, Wate could see the spouting

crimson even in the dim light. The man lay where he fell with half his chest torn away.

But the wagon was rushing toward doom. The creek loomed close, and there was no chance of pulling the horses to a stop. The front wheels dropped over a sharp, two-foot embankment as the horses, skidding into the creek-bed, trumpeted in terror and went down.

The wagon tongue snapped and buried its short, jagged end into the belly of one of the animals. The wagon itself came on—end over end—with the sound of breaking timbers and ripping canvas.

The two remaining pursuers pulled up momentarily, the sudden disaster taking them by surprise. Wate McCord dropped to one knee and lifted his Remington to his shoulder. The gun barked, and the hat of the near raider flew into the air. The second rider, instantly spotting Wate McCord, swerved low in the saddle and came straight in without a break in stride. Wate's finger pressed the trigger again.

Nothing happened. The rifle had jammed.

Then, the thunder of hooves was close. A giant figure loomed above Wate and hurled itself straight down upon him. Wate stiffened himself against the weight that smashed him to the ground. Wrenching, turning, seeking leverage, he opened his eyes. Then, for a moment, he lay motionless, stunned by sheer surprise.

HE WAS looking up into the dark, bestial face of Bill Queen.

A roar of rage welled up in McCord's throat. With a sudden, superhuman effort, he came up from the ground, hurling Queen's two-hundred and fifty pounds through the air. Without thought, he followed the path of Queen's body; followed it with a long, clean dive through space, to land squarely upon the big man's chest with both knees. His hands found the thick throat, and the sheer exultation of the moment gave him the strength of five men.

His fingers dug in, found Queen's wind and cut it off. The giant outlaw had been knocked off balance by the fury of McCord's attack. He lay stunned, but only for brief seconds.

In sudden desperation, his arms went around McCord's body, holding him close, and his head came up in a murderous, battering-ram thrust to smash into McCord's face. The force of contact broke McCord's nose and his grip on Queen's throat. McCord flung his head back as the splashing blood filled his eyes and flowed back into his throat, choking him.

Queen slid from under, and both men staggered to their feet at the same time.

McCord, getting set a split second before his giant adversary, shot a straight right in under his heart. Every ounce of McCord's strength went into that blow. It had to stop Queen at least momentarily, or McCord was through. This because the blood, spouting from his nose and from a long cut on his forehead, was hampering McCord, filling his eyes and blinding him, making him an easy mark for the murdering raider.

The blow did stop Queen. His mouth opened and his face mirrored the agony of the fist deep under his heart. He sank to his knees, clawing at the air, and McCord's feeling of hot triumph was complete. Fate had been good to him; had delivered his enemy into his hands.

Then, there was nothing. An explosion on the back of his skull, bright crimson flashing before his eyes. As he went forward, he knew

the taste of blood-soaked mud as his mouth hit the ground.

Oblivion.

IT WAS broad daylight when Wate came to. He rolled over, came to a sitting position, and looked blearily about him. No living thing was in sight. The wagon was still there, half in and half out of the now-muddied creek. A quick glance told McCord that both of the horses were dead. One had died from the stabbing wagon tongue and the other had evidently drowned.

A moaning sound came from the wagon. Obviously, someone inside it was still alive. McCord swayed to his feet. He walked to the scene of the wagon wreck, stepped down the embankment, and pulled back the torn canvas that covered the smashed vehicle.

A man lay among the wreckage at the extreme rear end of the buckled wagon. The man raised a bloody head. His mouth worked, but only garbled, throaty sounds came out. The man's first instinct was to fight. He swung one arm in a feeble motion as McCord reached for him.

"It's all right, partner," McCord said. "Take it easy. I was camping here by the creek, and you almost ran me over."

Sudden hope, then relief, appeared in the man's eyes. He was not old, probably in his late twenties, but thin and undernourished to the point of emaciation. Something seemed wrong with his speech. His large, eloquent eyes tried to convey a message to McCord as the latter carried him away from the wagon up to firm ground.

McCord laid him down gently and began examining him for injuries. But the man struggled to a sitting position and waved a desperate hand toward the wagon.

"Somebody else in there?" McCord asked, whereupon the man nodded eagerly and sought to push McCord in that direction. McCord got silently to his feet and returned to the wagon. He opened the back flap and crawled inside.

The wagon had buckled sharply across the middle, and McCord could see why it had not been utterly demolished. An iron strap of fair thickness had been screwed to the bed underneath from fore to aft. This kept the bed itself from splintering.

HE CLIMBED up over the ridge where the strap was bent, and peered into the shambles up front. He saw a mass of tumbled, yellow hair—frosty yellow, like goldenrod on a cold morning—streaked with blood; an almost naked young breast rising and falling, and two slim brown legs, One of her legs was spread-eagled out in an awkward position; a dangerous looking position. From appearances, the leg could have been broken.

At that moment, as though conscious of McCord's eyes upon her, the girl turned her head and opened her own eyes. Instinctively, she moved an arm to cover her nudity. Her expression showed only helplessness and despair.

"You've—you've got us," she said, as tears welled up and made clean little rivers on her begrimed face. "What are you going to do with us?"

McCord could not refrain from thinking what Bill Queen would have done under similar circumstances, but the thought dwelt only fleetingly. He was wondering about injuries. Here, far out in the heart of an outlaw land, was no place to care for casualties.

"It's all right, miss," McCord said. "Just as I told the man who's with you—I was camping here and had a ringside seat for the show. You're

safe now. I'll help you out and see how bad you're hurt. But first, how about that leg? Is it broken?"

McCord saw gratitude and relief for the second time in a few minutes. "I—don't know. I can't move it. It's stuck."

"Let me help you." Gently, Wate took the girl's leg in his hands, at the ankle and just above the knee. "Let me know if I hurt you. Yell quick. If it's broken, we've got to be awfully careful."

Very slowly, he lifted the leg. The girl bit her lip, but said nothing. After he had raised it a few inches to clear the wreckage jammed against it, he stopped and looked at her with concern. "Hurt?"

She shook her head. "I guess it isn't broken. That feels good. Much better."

Wate breathed a sigh of relief. "Put an arm over my shoulder. I'll get you out of here."

The girl reddened now, as though becoming suddenly conscious of her condition. Her eyes pleaded, and then she gave McCord a slight, uncertain smile. "I know this isn't a time to be prudish," she said, "but if I could just have something—a blanket."

McCord reddened himself. "Of course." He turned away and dug around until he found a sizable piece of brown burlap. As the girl sat up, he put it around her smooth brown shoulders. "This will do for the time being. Hold onto me now, and we'll get you out of here."

As he lifted her from the wagon, the girl looked up front and saw the still bodies of the horses. "They're dead?"

"That's right. And you're lucky you aren't dead, too."

HE CARRIED the girl up the embankment and laid her down beside the man. For a moment, she lay back with an arm over her eyes. Then, she sat up clutching burlap to her. "I'm all right," she said. "We owe you a great deal for your help." Then, she turned to the silent man. "Are you badly hurt, Neal?"

The man she called Neal shook his head emphatically and made motions indicating the same question.

"No. I guess I'm all right. We were very fortunate. I twisted my ankle and my side hurts a little, but it's just wrenched."

She now turned her attention to McCord. "I'm Patricia Morley," she said. "Neal and I were on the way to a town called Santa Blanca. We'd passed two way-stations and...well, it's a rather long story." She smiled up at him wearily, and put a hand to her aching side.

"My name is McCord," he said. "Wate McCord. You can tell me about it later. Just now, you've got to get some rest. You're fagged out."

"Do you think we're safe? Will they come back?"

"I don't think so." McCord's eyes narrowed at a sudden thought. "You say you passed two way-stations? Just a minute." He turned and strode rapidly off across the desert.

The dead raider. Wate had forgotten him in the rush of subsequent events. Now, pressed on by a strong hunch, he approached the inert and mangled body. He knelt down and turned it over. A moment later, he straightened up with a certain air of satisfaction and stood looking down into the dead face of Antonio—he of the swiftly thrown knife and the voluble, drunken babbling.

This put a new slant to the picture. Somehow, after he'd left the adobe, more than two days rearward, the Mexican had teamed up with Bill Queen for a lawless pursuit of the

The girl instinctively moved to cover her nudity, her expression one of pain and despair

slight man and the beautiful yellow-haired Patricia Morley. How come?

There was little use pondering on it until he had the couple's story. But there was something else—another question for which they would not have the answer. This question loomed large in McCord's mind. Why had Queen left him alive? Obviously, the third raider was responsible for the blow which had felled McCord and sent him into oblivion. But it was an oblivion from which he should never have returned. Why hadn't Queen put a slug into his head and left him to rot away in the desert?

McCORD GAVE this a lot of thought as he went to round up the dead Antonio's horse. The animal was a hundred yards out in the desert, its reins hanging. Evidently having been taught to stand for a ground tie, it traveled by the process of continually circling the fallen reins and moving a little farther away each time it turned.

The horse was skittish, rolling its eyes until the whites showed large, but it suffered McCord to come close and take the reins. He led the horse back to his camp, thinking the while that it made two mounts for three people. He unsaddled the horse and tethered it near his own.

When he returned, he noted that Patricia Morley had disappeared. Neal answered his unspoken question by nodding in the direction of a sheltered section of the creek. Obviously, the girl had sought privacy to augment her clothing and make herself presentable.

After Patricia had been gone over an hour, McCord frowned and went to the creek. He walked upstream until he came upon the girl stretched on the bank sound asleep. She'd patched up her dress with strips of burlap and had bathed in the stream. But fatigue had overtaken her in the process. She looked like a tired child, her golden hair spilling out on the grass.

McCord smiled briefly and turned away. He let her sleep for three hours. While she slept, he debated his best course of action. The finding of Antonio engaged in a raid was, when analyzed, no great surprise. Regardless of this, Wate decided he had no reason to doubt the Mexican's information regarding Queen's headquarters. He'd gotten Antonio drunk and had paid him well, and he had a feeling the man had told the truth. Possibly he'd even forgotten the telling when he sobered up.

Besides, Patricia Morley and her strange companion were headed for Santa Blanca, and Wate felt he could hardly desert them now.

SO THE Village of the White Saint was still his destination, but, because he was in a hurry to be on his way, he had no chance to question the girl until they were on the move shortly after noon. Patricia rode in Wate's saddle with Wate mounted behind her. Neal brought up the rear.

"What's wrong with him?" Wate asked. "How did he lose his voice?"

Wate felt a shudder ripple through the slim young body so close to his own.

"Not his voice. His. . . tongue."

"How did it happen?"

"During the war—back in Georgia—on our plantation. It's—are you sure you want to hear it?"

"If you want to tell me."

"Our plantation was burned toward the end of the war, and my mother and I and a few of the men unfit for service were the only ones left there. We struggled along as best we could, and finally mother died."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you, but it was probably for the best. She lived for quite a while with a broken heart. Anyhow, a band of Northern soldiers stormed through one day—at least, they wore Northern uniforms. Neal saw them coming and didn't like the look of them. He hid me in a root cellar, and I stayed there all night and far into the next day. When I came out, I found that all the other men had run away—all except Neal. The soldiers were gone, too, and I found Neal lying in the yard, half dead from loss of blood."

The girl hesitated, then went on: "It was awful. His—his tongue had been cut out."

She spoke in a low voice, evidently so Neal, riding behind, wouldn't hear her, and McCord could scarcely catch her words. "While I was nursing him, some of the other men straggled in out of the woods. They told me what had happened. Neal had not run away, so the brutes got their hands off him while some of the others watched helplessly from the woods. They told me the leader of the raiders demanded to know where I was. He said he knew there was a girl on the plantation. Neal wouldn't tell them and they tortured him. Then, before they left, this leader did...that to him."

"I doubt if they were Northern soldiers," McCord said quietly. "Toward the end of the war, all sorts of blacklegs and murderers ranged the south, wearing whatever uniform best suited their need. Many of they were caught and shot by both Northern and Southern troops. But some of them were never captured."

Patricia shrugged her slim shoulders. "I don't know. Except they never came back."

"Georgia is a long ways away," McCord said. "How did you and Neal get out here in the Nations?"

"MY BROTHER came back from the war heartsick and discouraged. When he found the plantation in a shambles and mother dead, he wanted nothing Georgia had to offer. We packed what we had and started west as soon as we heard the news of President Lincoln's assassination. That, I think, was the worst thing that happened to the south."

"It was a terrible blow to the whole country."

"We stayed in St. Louis for a while, the three of us, but Bob had an urge to move on. He heard from someone about Santa Blanca, this settlement in the Nations. It was a lawless country, he knew, but he felt that opportunity lay in getting there first and sticking it out until law and order came."

"He went on alone then?"

"Yes. Neal had a sick spell and needed care. We didn't dream of leaving him, of course, after what he'd done for me, and then too, Bob felt the Nations was no place for a girl until the situation got better. So I stayed in St. Louis to take care of Neal.

"We didn't hear from Bob for over six months, and I began to worry. Finally, I decided to follow him. Neal was a lot better then, so we started out."

"Good lord! It was an impossible trip! I don't see how you got this far!"

She turned and gave him a fleeting smile over her shoulder. "We wouldn't be this far if it hadn't been for you!"

"But—"

"It wasn't so bad. Really. We traveled several hundred miles with a wagon train heading for California. Then, I hired one of the men as a guide, and the three of us struck out south."

"Did the leaders of the train approve this?"

"No, but there was nothing they could do about it. I guess I should have taken their advice, though, because three nights ago, the guide deserted us and we had to go on alone. We never saw him again, but he was decent enough in one way. He left a map showing us the route to follow, indicating the two way-stations."

McCord listened to the amazing tale of this girl's courage.

"Both of you should be dead ten times over," he said gently. "An angel must have you by the hand."

She laughed, somewhat shyly. "No one would have thought so when those men started chasing us."

"Did you cross them on the trail?"

Patricia turned to glance swiftly back at Neal, who rode with his eyes never resting, always searching the landscape. "No. That was rather peculiar. Something—some feeling—told me not to go close to the last way-station, I don't know why. Anyhow, we camped some distance from it and Neal must have gone to check on it after I went to sleep. Anyhow, something very strange happened."

THE GIRL glanced backward again to make sure that Neal was out of earshot, then went on in a whisper. "I woke up with Neal prodding my shoulder. He was greatly excited and he hurried me into the wagon.. He drove a while and then I saw the way-station—the adobe—by the light of the half-moon. There was an oil lamp shining through one of the windows."

"Neal drove you to the adobe?"

"No. To within a few hundred yards of it. Then, he left me sitting there and walked to it, carrying his rifle. Everything was quiet, and then I heard a shot and Neal came streaking back to the wagon. He jumped into the seat and whipped the horses into a gallop. Back at the way-station. I could hear people yelling and firing guns."

"Do you know why Neal drove you so close to the place?"

Patricia shook her head. "I never asked him about it. We started off across the desert in the darkness, and that's when an angel really had us by the hand. We should have smashed up a dozen times. The men followed us. Several times I thought we'd lost them, but they got track of us again and—well, you know the rest."

McCord was silent for a time. He was possessed of an uneasy feeling that he was being sidetracked from his original objective. Bill Queen. Such a project, he felt, called for a lone hand. Yet, here he was involved with a girl who did not belong in the Nations, and a tortured, mutilated man whose eyes held great bitterness.

In a way, McCord was grateful for the companionship. It helped to keep his mind occupied, to keep him from dwelling night and day on the horrible picture which obsessed his mind—Bill Queen lifting the screaming Candy onto his horse and carrying her away; the hot, lustful look in Queen's eyes as he held Candy's lush body against him, gloating over what was to come.

"A day and a half at the most," Wate said, "and you'll be with your brother."

"Do you have anyone in Santa Blanca?" the girl asked. "Relatives? Is that why you're going there?"

"I have someone there—yes. But not a relative," Wate replied grimly. After that, they rode in silence.

SANTA BLANCA, a collection of adobes plus a scattered few frames on the main business street, was living proof that no place on earth can be entirely evil. A place as

foul as Sodom, as dangerous as Port Said, it was the focal point toward which gravitated every blackleg opportunist, every murderer, robber and renegade in the vast unpoliced area known as the Nations.

Yet, it was not entirely evil, because even the damned need to buy and sell, to eat and drink, and to make traffic with the comparatively honest. And wherever there is an outlet for their wares, the merchant, the hotel keeper and the restaurateur will set up a business. They were, of course, the hardiest of the breed; those willing to take their chances; men who carried guns and were willing to use them if need be.

And there was even a burlesque of law in the Village of the White Saint —a blustering swashbuckler named Calloway who established his office, hung out a sign reading JUSTICE OF THE PEACE, and went into business without permission from anyone.

Wate McCord was surprised to see the sign. He paused while passing the place and wondered about it, wondered by what authority the Justice functioned. Then, he went on down the main street of Santa Blanca and selected the largest saloon in sight.

A paunchy barkeep pushed a bottle toward Wate, took his gold piece and dropped it into a drawer. No saloon in Santa Blanca made change. A man laid down his money and drank until it was gone.

"Nice town you've got here," Wate said. "I'm new. Just came in." He dropped another gold piece. The barkeep eyed it with no change of expression and remained silent.

"Looking for a friend of mine. Fellow named—"

"I don't know very many people around here. I just hand out the drinks."

Wate dropped another coin, then frowned. "Let's stop being coy. How much will it cost me to locate a man named Bob Morley. He's probably in business somewhere on the street."

The barkeep relaxed. He picked up the gold and leaned fat forearms on the bar. "That won't cost you much at all, mister. The name's familiar. You go up to the north end of the street and turn to the left. Ride a quarter of a mile and look around. You'll find him."

"What kind of business is he in?"

The barkeep grinned. "He ain't in no business at all. He's in the cemetery."

WATE SET his glass down very slowly, stared at it for a moment, then raised his eyes to the barkeep. "How did it happen?"

"Gun fracas in the street. He was murdered, I guess you'd call it, but the other man paid the penalty." The barkeep chuckled. "Paid for his crime, you might say."

"Was he hung?"

"Naw! It was only a killing. He was fined ten dollars and costs by Justice Calloway. The costs was twenty-five dollars. Nigh broke the man, it did." The barkeep threw back his head and emitted a toothy laugh.

When he was through, Wate asked, "Where can I find a yellow-belly named Bill Queen?"

The barkeep dropped his levity like an old overcoat. His face went blank, his eyes flat and impersonal. "Never heard the name, mister. You want another drink?"

McCord turned from the bar and went out into the street. He retraced his steps until he was standing under the sign reading: JUSTICE OF THE PEACE. He went inside.

A crude railing separated him from a large desk at which a mustached, elderly man sat with his hat tipped forward over his eyes. The man was dozing.

"Your name Calloway?" Wate asked.

A hand came up to push the hat back. A pair of ice-blue eyes surveyed Wate from head to toe. There was insolence in the eyes and the face. The features were built to mirror insolence.

"*Justice of the Peace* Calloway, son. Don't ever forget that handle. It's important."

"I'm looking for information about a man named Robert Morley. Maybe you can help me out?"

Calloway's jaws were moving rhythmically now. He pursed his lips and shot a stream of tobacco juice into a clay pot standing in a corner. His eyes squinted thoughtfully. "Morley ...Morley... He ever appear before me?"

"Not that I know of. But I understand his murderer did."

"Oh, sure. I recollect now. About three months ago it was. Seems to me he took affront at a remark some hombre made in the street and pulled a gun on him. The hombre was a mite faster than Morley and killed him. The jasper claimed self defense, but I gave Morley the benefit of the doubt 'cause he was dead and couldn't testify in his own behalf. I fined the jasper that killed him, thus putting the onus of murder on the said hombre."

"By what authority do you function?" Wate asked.

CALLOWAY SCOWLED and got slowly to his feet. "Now, listen here, young fellow. If you're looking for trouble—"

"I merely asked the question. Why should that lead to trouble?"

"I function by my own authority. Want to make an issue out of it?"

"I didn't say that."

Calloway sat down, still scowling. "Well, you better not. Wouldn't be healthy."

"Did Morley leave anything? Any estate?"

"Nothing to speak of," Calloway returned levelly. "A pocket knife and a .45 Colt. They're laying around here somewhere, I guess. I'll look them up if you insist."

"I guess it doesn't matter. I wouldn' want to put you to any trouble."

The sarcasm apparently went over Calloway's head. "And I guess the mud house he put up out in the yucca could be called his. Nobody else wants it."

"A house?"

"Uh-huh. About four miles due west of town. The jasper had some cock-eyed idea of starting a herd. Plumb foolishness, of course. He drilled a well and damned if he didn't hit water, but it'll dry up, if it hasn't already. No water lasts out here."

"Would there be any objection to his sister taking it over?"

Calloway's brows went up. "Did the jasper have a sister?"

"That's right. I rode into town with her."

The mustachioed rascal considered this. "No...don't see why anybody'd object. But there's nothing to take over. Who in tarnation'd want a mud house out in the desert?"

"What about his herd?"

"He'd just gotten started," Calloway returned. "Had himself a few bone-yard longhorns as I recollect."

"What happened to them?"

"Well, now—that I don't know. With nobody to tend them, I guess they must have wandered away." There was a moment of dead silence. "Yes, sir, that's probably just what happened. Them critters wandered away."

McCord's good sense told him it was foolish, under the circumstances, to antagonize this scaley old reprobate.

He gritted his teeth and walked swiftly out of the office. This because he was close to reaching across the railing and taking the man by the throat.

ONCE OUTSIDE in the street, his anger cooled, was washed away by the starker and more immediate job at hand. He had to tell Patricia Morley, waiting in a room at the town's only hotel, that her brother was dead. He shrank from this duty, but his feet led him, nonetheless, along the board walk until he stood in front of the hotel. He entered and slowly mounted the steps to the second floor. After holding his knuckles poised for a full half-minute, he rapped on the panel.

There was the sound of quick running feet beyond the door. Then, Patricia Morley was framed in the opening and it struck McCord forcibly for the first time—this girl was beautiful. There was more than mere beauty, however. He was looking at the clear freshness of youth, the indefinable something that makes every girl beautiful in the eyes of a man. That mystical quality which, once despoiled, never returns.

It went through McCord's mind like a knife thrust that Candy Thompson had had that quality but a few short weeks before. Now, it would be gone from her forever.

He entered the room and closed the door behind him. Patricia, her eyes questioning, stood before him in silence. He put his hands on her shoulders and forced her gently backwards until the backs of her thighs touched the bed.

"Sit down," he said quietly.

She sat with hands folded looking up at him, and the complete trust in her expression hit him like a tangible pain.

"Did you find Bob? Is he coming?"

McCord fumbled for words and could find none. Then, he decided there was no use trying to soften a blow that could not be softened.

"Your brother is dead," he told her.

The color washed from her face. Her lips opened, closed again. Her hand came up to press against his chest as though fending him off. He took the hand in his and held it tight.

"He was shot down in the street. Killed in a gun fight. I didn't get any of the details. In a place like this—in times like these—details don't matter much. We just have to accept the facts."

HE HAD MADE no attempt to forecast her reactions. He'd kept his mind blank on this point. She sat perfectly still for a time, then slowly withdrew her hand from his. Seated on the bed, she was staring straight at his belt buckle. He stepped aside, but her eyes remained set. They were now looking at the cracked water pitcher on the washstand.

He said, "I'm sorry. I'm very sorry. I wish there was something I could do."

"Please go away. Please leave me alone for—for an hour. I want to be alone now. I hope I don't sound ungrateful. I—I just want to be by myself."

"I understand." He moved toward the door, then turned. "Do you know where Neal is? I'll tell him."

She shook her head. "No. Leave that to me. Besides, I don't know where he is. He's around the town somewhere."

McCord closed the door and went downstairs into the lobby of the hotel. At the foot of the stairs he stopped short, frowning. With the air of a man in deep thought, he reached into

his shirt pocket, brought out papers and a bag of tobacco, and began rolling a cigarette.

His frown deepened. Just what kind of a business was he becoming involved in? What did it matter to him whether Bob Morley had been killed or not? It wasn't his responsibility. Neither was he obligated to worry about the yellow-haired girl upstairs who didn't have sense enough to stay where her brother had left her.

He, McCord, had come to Santa Blanca for one reason alone—to do a single job—and he had no intention of being sidetracked. He'd done the humane thing regarding Patricia Morley. He'd picked her up in the desert and had brought her to her destination. So far as he was concerned, that ended it. He had some business of his own, and that business was named Bill Queen. He wanted only to find the man, and find him quick. With this thought in mind, he lit his cigarette and walked out on the porch of the hotel.

He raised his eyes and saw Bill Queen, riding a skittish buckskin, riding directly past him up the street.

McCord let out a single exultant yell—a sound not unlike that of an Apache warwhoop. Then: "You! Queen!", in a voice heard far up and down the street.

Bill Queen's head came around as though jerked by a string. In the same motion, his hand went for his gun. But he was far too slow to escape the slugs from McCord's .45 Colt. It was something entirely different that saved him from coughing out his life in the middle of the street.

AS McCORD'S shoulders hunched and his hand closed over the butt of his gun, a dead weight hit him solidly from behind—from the doorway of the hotel through which he'd just stepped. Completely losing his balance, he hurtled forward, pushed out one leg to save himself, and sprawled full length on the porch behind the waist-high horizontal planking which separated the porch from the board walk beyond.

As he went down, he heard the sudden flurry of hoof-beats in the street —hoofbeats diminishing—as Bill Queen raked his buckskin on up the street, then flung himself from the saddle and disappeared between two buildings.

In a high rage, McCord rolled over and came to his knees. Then, he froze in consternation as he spotted his attacker.

It was Neal.

McCord came slowly erect, staring in sheer surprise at the thin little man. Neal was lying full length on the porch, looking up at McCord with fear in his face. While McCord stood open-mouthed, struggling for words, Neal went into a desperate pantomine which would have been funny under other circumstances.

He came to his knees and pointed at the door sill, then at his own foot. Jumping to his feet, he scurried back into the hotel, only to turn around and emerge again, catching his toe on the sill and falling headlong. Then he lay still, his eyes begging McCord to understand.

What he intended to show was obvious. He'd come through the doorway behind McCord, had tripped, fallen against the latter, and had knocked him flat.

With a curse, McCord was off the porch and running up the street. He plunged headlong into the narrow areaway between the two buildings where Queen had disappeared. He ran the length of it, leaped into the open at the rear end and stood crouched, ready for action.

But there was no one to act against. A Mexican who had been squatting, asleep, beside the wall of the building, opened his eyes and regarded McCord with wonder. Then, as McCord retreated into the areaway as he had come, the Mexican shrugged, closed his eyes and returned to siesta.

McCord walked on up the street and turned into the door of the first saloon he came to. He downed two quick drinks and stood there with his elbows on the bar, scowling into a cracked mirror.

His thoughts were centered on the occurrence of the preceding few minutes. What was going on anyhow? Were the fates playing with him? Were the laws of chance in conspiracy to see that he put no slugs into Bill Queen? Two opportunities had been afforded him. In the first, he'd been fortunate to come away with his own life. In the second, he'd been knocked flat by a clumsy mute in the very act of sending his bullets home.

THEN, THE suspicion hit him squarely: Had Neal stumbled by chance, or by design? If by chance, the coincidence was staggering. He'd made the only possible move that could have saved Queen's life.

McCord's mind went back to that other incident Patricia had told him about: Neal's mysterious action at the way-station. What shots had been fired by whom?

Neal, McCord told himself, was somehow allied with Bill Queen; was seeking to protect him. Projecting this supposition starkly, McCord now sought to analyze it.

How could such a thing be possible? Where had Neal originally made contact with the thieving cutthroat? And, if he were truly in league with the man, why had he fled across the desert that night? And why had Queen and his men been in such murderous pursuit?

Neal's treachery seemed impossible, yet it was the only logical answer to subsequent happenings.

Unless Neal's fall had been truly an accident.

Still pondering the problem, Wate walked out into the street. He stood on the walk and his thoughts switched to his more pressing problem—Bill Queen. He looked up and down the long street, wondering if a house-to-house search would be feasible. He decided against it. Queen knew the town, McCord did not. Queen certainly had friends in this brigand's stronghold. McCord was all alone.

Wate shrugged and walked toward the hotel. A few moments later, he was knocking on Patricia Morley's door. When the door opened, he found himself looking into the dark, inquiring eyes of Neal. The man stepped back and McCord walked into the room.

Patricia sat huddled in the only chair provided. Her beautiful oval face was pale, her eyes were red from weeping, but she was now composed.

It's good that she could cry, McCord thought. Then he said, "I was told of a place your brother built about four miles out of town. It was his home, no doubt. I'll take you there if you wish."

There was only the slightest tremor in her voice. "I'd like it very much. You've been good to us, very good."

She arose from the chair and McCord turned toward the door. Halfway into the hall, he stopped and looked back. His gaze, frankly hostile, was on Neal. "Is he going too?"

"I—I think he'd like to," Patricia said. "If it wouldn't be too much trouble."

"No trouble at all," McCord said

gruffly. "I'll get the horses and see about renting a third one."

THEY RODE out into the desert from the Village of the White Saint, McCord and Patricia Morley side by side, and Neal bringing up the rear as usual.

"What is he to you?" Wate asked, indicating Neal with a backward jerk of his head. "What did he do in Georgia?"

"He's a very distant relative by marriage—just how distant I don't know. His people were very poor. They had nothing at all, and Neal came to stay with us."

"Is he—do you trust him?"

Quick surprise came into Patricia's face. "Trust him? Why, of course. I told you what he did for me. I'd trust him with my life. Why do you ask?"

McCord frowned. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe it's this town. This country. Living in this hell hole, a man might be doubtful about his best friend."

Ahead of them, two adobe buildings and a crude pole corral shimmered in the high sun. The buildings stood on comparatively high ground—a sort of low mesa—and were apparently deserted. They looked shabby, almost cringing, against the incredible vastness of the mesquite and cactus dotted plain.

McCord surveyed them with slitted eyes. "I wonder how your brother expected to raise cattle in this God-forsaken place?"

Patricia's head came up proudly. "I don't know," she said. "But then, you didn't know Bob. He would have accomplished it, whatever the odds."

"I'm sure he would," McCord said, and swung down from his horse in front of the larger of the two buildings.

Patricia came quickly to his side. "Would you—would you mind," she asked shyly, "if I went in first—alone? Maybe it's silly, but—"

"I understand. Neal and I will look the shed over."

McCord turned and strode toward the small building a couple of hundred yards away. When he reached it, he turned and looked back. Patricia had vanished, and Neal had not accompanied McCord. The thin little man stood by his horse's head—stood motionless, his eyes staring off into pace while he rubbed the animal's nose. McCord went into the shed and stood peering around in the comparative darkness.

But his mind was elsewhere. On Bill Queen. Queen certainly knew, by this time, that McCord wasn't in Santa Blanca by chance. The big raider couldn't help knowing his life was McCord's grim objective. Then what was he doing, what plans was he making to protect himself?

AGAIN McCord's mind wandered to the question which continued to plague him. Why had Queen spared his life there at the creek? And, for that matter, why had he spared Neal's life and left Patricia Morley unmolested? As luscious a creature as Patricia should certainly have been a natural target for the black-hearted Queen's lust, just as—McCord's face darkened and his eyes grew bitter—just as the body of Candy Thompson must have served to satiate that same lust.

McCord scowled. There was an infuriating frustration in this whole affair—a chain of unanswered questions that nagged at McCord's mind and gave hint of ominous things to come. McCord's instinct told him that all was not as it seemed—that a great volcano of human passions was close to the blowing point, and that the

volcano was soon to explode about his ears.

He estimated a half hour had passed, and turned his steps toward the larger building. Neal, he noted, had not moved from his position. He still stood by his mount's head, stroking the animal's velvet nose and staring off into space.

McCord walked past him and approached the open door of the adobe. He stepped inside. The room was crudely, yet neatly furnished. All the pieces were obviously hand made by someone with not too much skill in that sort of thing. McCord went on through into the second room. He stopped in the doorway, came to an abrupt halt to keep from running into Patricia Morley.

The girl was standing just inside, oblivious of everything, even McCord's approaching footsteps. Suddenly sensing his presence, she came out of her solitary reverie and whirled in alarm. The movement threw her squarely into McCord's arms.

She uttered a small, choked cry and McCord could feel the pressure of her breasts against his chest. The quick gust of her breathing was full in his face with her lips just an inch beyond.

They stood frozen in this posture for a limitless moment, her eyes wide and staring directly into his. A look of wonder, of sudden awakening was in her face.

And, far back in McCord's mind was an understanding of the moment. His senses stirred; they could scarcely have done otherwise with Patricia Morley so close. Her beautiful body pressing in would have stirred a man of stone.

But McCord's thought was: She's almost as beautiful and warm and desirable as Candy.

ANOTHER instant and her arms would have been tight around his neck, her lips hard against his own. But during that moment, McCord was again seeing the look, the terror on Candy's face as she fought Queen that night—the night of her defilement.

McCord, his throat tight, pushed Patricia gently backward. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

She drew away and sought to compose herself. "It's all right," she said, lowering her eyes. "I guess I was lost in my own thoughts."

"I'm going to try and find out who killed your brother," McCord said. "We'll even up the score."

Then he bit his lip, turned away and frowned. Why had he said that? Why should he risk his life to get the killer of a man he didn't even know? What business was it of his?

McCord, he thought sourly, you're quite a fellow. Got any grievances, anybody? Just bring them to Wate McCord. He's in the business of squaring accounts. The line forms to the right, and don't crowd.

Patricia's voice broke into his thoughts: "No," she said quietly. "Violence isn't the answer to violence. Killing doesn't avenge killing. It just makes more sorrow, more bloodshed, more misery. I learned that back in Georgia."

While he gave scant thought to her philosophy, McCord welcomed her words; welcomed the release from his rash, stupid promise. "Don't you think we'd better be getting back now?"

She nodded. "I'm glad I came, but I don't ever want to come again. This is all part of the past now. Bob took it from the desert and the desert can take it back. I want to remember him the way he was when he waved goodbye at St. Louis."

"I understand," Wate said.

As they dismounted in front of the hotel, he said, "You'd better go up and rest now. Stay in your room and get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow we'll talk things over. You can tell me what your plans are."

She smiled at him. "I am tired," she said.

McCord turned the horses over to Neal and moved off up the board sidewalk. He had no idea where he was going. He only knew that he was completely discouraged with his progress so far, and thus in a low and somewhat truculent mood.

THEN, HE stopped suddenly. So suddenly, that the man walking behind bumped him sharply, and cursed as he went around and on by.

The Blue Madonna!

What had he been using for brains? McCord wondered. He'd given Antonio a sizable amount of gold and had filled him with whisky to elicit information. Then, in the rush of events, he'd allowed an important part of what he'd learned to slip his mind.

Instantly, the whole world brightened for McCord. The Blue Madonna. It was an integral part of this puzzle he was involved in. Possibly the end of his trail. McCord straightened his shoulder and moved on down the street. His eyes now alert, watching every saloon he passed for that name.

The Blue Madonna. He found it on a side street just off the main avenue of traffic. A small, unpretentious sign hung over the doorway, but the building—as buildings went in Santa Blanca—was a large one. It was two stories high, but McCord found upon looking it over that the second floor extended only halfway back. The rear half of the building was only one floor under a low, flat roof.

McCord had walked on past the door. Now, he turned and retraced his steps. Glancing up and down the quiet side street, he hitched his gun belt into a snug fit around his hips, and opened the door.

The sound of a well-played guitar and a pair of rhythm gourds hit his ears as McCord's eyes knifed around the large room, locating the various exits and getting the general layout. There was a bar at the far end, and a dozen or so tables were strung out along the near wall. A stage occupied most of the other side, with stairways leading upward at both ends of the stage.

Four musicians sat in front of the raised stage, two of them motionless, the other two languidly furnishing the music by which a slim, flame-like girl danced. She wasn't a very good dancer, and sought to cover her deficiency by a great deal of heel clicking. But her smile was attractive, and she seemed sincerely eager to please. A few customers sat at the tables, and there was noisy applause when the girl finished her number and whirled off the stage in a flash of crimson skirts.

McCord dropped into a chair. He chose a table in a dark corner. So secluded was the spot that the waiter did not locate him for some five minutes. During that time, McCord sat tense, his eyes continually on the move. He had a fleeting hope that fate, having frustrated him so far, would favor him to the extent of bringing Bill Queen into view.

BUT THE big man failed to appear. There were several characters who matched him in arrogant and sinister appearance, but no Bill Queen.

Then, the waiter was at McCord's elbow, his voice soft, insistent: "Refreshment, *Senor?*"

"Whisky," McCord said.

The waiter drifted toward the bar and McCord reached down, unconsciously, and loosened his gun in its leather. A few restless eyes passed his way, came back to inspect him, but always traveled on. Evidently, no one recognized him as the man who'd tried to throw down on Bill Queen a few hours before. For this good fortune, McCord was thankful, but he remained wary nonetheless.

He had previously noticed that the wall behind him was pierced at intervals by arched passages leading into some kind of a hallway along that side of the building. With this in mind, he had seated himself so he could cover both these openings and the main area of the room, also.

Thus, when he turned his head at the sound of footsteps, he was able to see quite clearly the girl who stepped through one of the archways.

It was Candy Thompson.

McCord tensed. Without thinking, he came half out of his chair and was poised there, gripping the edge of the table with hard hands. His mouth opened. Her name formed on his lips. But it was never uttered.

At the same instant, Candy's eyes had found him there at the table, and it was her expression that held him frozen. He had never given any thought to what he would see in Candy's face when they met. He would have possibly expected a surge of happiness; maybe the sheer gratitude he'd found in Patricia Morely back in the wagon on the creek.

But Candy's reaction was one of pure, unadulterated fear.

The look of terror froze McCord into his crouched position, and at that moment, as though carefully staged, there was a high, thin scream, that of a woman in pain. The scream was muffled, coming from somewhere above, somewhere beyond thick walls. At the sound of it, a few customers grinned and leered at each other. There was coarse laughter and knowing winks. Then, music welled up to cover the scream. But it wasn't necessary now. There was only silence from above.

McCord had been entirely oblivious of all this. He had had eyes and thoughts only for Candy. At that moment, Queen could have walked up and killed him with impunity. McCord was on his feet now, but again he froze as Candy motioned desperately, a sweep of her hand as though pushing him backward into his chair.

THEN, HER eyes went swiftly around the room. Apparently, no one was paying any attention. She moved close to McCord. Her whisper was urgent, pleading: "Go! Please, Wate. Please! Leave this instant and never come back! Do it for me!"

Only for a moment did she remain close to him. Immediately, she drew away and moved off across the room between the tables and toward the stairway at the left of the stage. She went swiftly up the stairs and vanished without looking back.

McCord's mind was working again. He had to talk to Candy. He had to find out what was behind her strange action. She should have come to him and stayed by his side while he fought his way out of this place, if fighting became necessary. Had Queen tortured her, degraded her to the point where her spirit was entirely gone and she could know nothing but pure animal fear?

McCord stood by the table, his hand on his gun. Up the stairs after her, he thought. Then, as quickly, he rejected this idea. He might reach Candy, but he would have no time to discover what had happened to her,

and certainly no opportunity to get her away from the place.

He was not misled by the seemingly placid appearance of his surroundings. If this was Queen's stronghold, as it most certainly was, McCord's life wasn't worth a peso inside these doors. He had been left alone only because he'd been overlooked; because no one knew who he was. He had to reach Candy's side, however, and the only way to do it lay through stealth.

Throwing a gold piece on the table, he made a leisurely exit. He forced this upon himself; walked slowly toward the door with the muscles of his back tightened against a possible bullet, his ears attuned for the sudden crash of gun fire. None came. He closed the door behind him, continued at a casual pace up the walk until he came to the narrow alley beside the building. He ducked inside and found himself in almost complete darkness.

It wasn't too hard to achieve the roof of the one-floor rear section of the building. He found a barrel beside the closed and barred back door; a barrel seemingly put there for the purpose.

The light fom two shaded windows helped McCord find his way along the roof. His footsteps were muted by blankets spread on the dried-mud surface. Evidently, the roof was used for siestas. The door to the second floor hallway beyond was closed and barred. But the door did not fit well, and McCord found that it was held by an ordinary wooden slat turning, probably, on a single nail inside. He pushed the blade of his knife through the wide space next to the jamb and found that this was true. The slat turned silently on its pivot. He opened the door slowly, and closed it without a sound.

Two lamps on wall brackets furnished the illumination by which McCord could see a series of doors set opposite each other at intervals along the hall. Working slowly, he tried the first of these. It was locked. He pressed his ear to the panel and could hear nothing. He passed on to the next.

He turned the knob softly, pushed it open, and a line of yellow lamp light was revealed. There were no sounds from within. He pushed the door wider. A voice, tired, but striving to be cheerful, said, "Don't be bashful, handsome. Come on in. I'm lonesome tonight."

The girl stood beside the bed clad in a blue kimona. She was smiling, but there was instinctive defiance in her attitude as she stood with her hands on her hips, her head held high, the kimona open to reveal the naked body she had for sale.

McCORD closed the door and stood waiting in the hall to see what the girl would do. She did nothing. McCord scowled and moved on up the hall. He almost turned the knob of the next door before he heard the low male voice beyond the panel. He backed carefully away and put his ear to the door opposite.

Stifled sobs came into his ear. He turned the knob and pushed inward. This room was also lighted and there was a bed, but the girl inside was not cheerfully defiant. She lay on the bed with her kimona pulled tight about her. She was crying softly her head buried in her arms. She sensed rather than heard Wate and turned her head. Wate saw a white face and a pair of frightened eyes as he pulled the door shut. It hadn't been necessary for him to see the girl's face. Her hair was jet black. Her name was not Candy.

Wate investigated two more doors. Low voices—those of a man and a

woman—came from beyond the first. Wate opened the second. He found a luxuriously furnished living room—no bed here—with Candy standing by the single window looking out into the dark night.

She turned and faced him with no apparent surprise whatever. "Hello, Wate. I've been expecting you. Somehow, I knew you'd find your way up here."

McCord was drinking her in while his heart pounded in his throat. "Candy! Candy—my darling!"

He took a quick step forward, then froze as her hand came up as though to fend him off. There was neither gladness nor welcome in her voice. "No, Wate—no. Don't come any closer. Sit there—on that bench. And don't raise your voice. It would mean your life if they heard you."

Wate sat down, his face a study in wonderment and surprise. "But, Candy—I've come for you! I'm taking you away from here. Do you have a wrap of some kind? We'll go out over the back roof, and then, when you're safely away, I'll come back and—"

She shook her head, a little smile playing sadly on her lips. "No, Wate. You must leave." And the wonder in the man increased. There's pity in her voice, he thought. But not for herself. Pity for me!

IT WAS beyond understanding. Then, he felt what to him was the obvious truth, and his anguish and all his manhood raved and writhed within him: He's broken her. He's raped and beaten and smashed the spirit out of her. She's still walking around and breathing and speaking, but Candy—the Candy I loved—is dead. She's dead.

The girl appeared to divine the trend of his thoughts. "I know what's in your mind," she said, "but it doesn't matter. I'm not the same girl you knew in Kansas. That was a long, long time ago—"

"Only two months, darling." His hands were white as they clutched the edge of the bench.

"A couple of life times ago, Wate. Sometimes, a complete life time can be crowded into a minute—an hour."

"The yellow swine has ruined—"

A slight bitterness came into her smile. "Ruined me? Yes, I suppose so. That's the word the honest, respectable people use in a case like this, isn't it?"

A look of agony came to his face; pure anguish. "My Candy," he said in a harsh whisper, "trapped in a place like this...."

"I'm not a harlot, if that's what you mean," she said. "No men are sent to my room. In fact, I've known only one man—only one."

The last words were like a hot iron plunged into Wate's pounding heart. His face darkened, and the veins stood out in his throat. He got to his feet in a sort of animal crouch, as though trying to control himself, but not succeeding.

"Where can I find him?" he asked, and suddenly all restraints were gone. Wate had passed the point where he could listen to reason and hold himself in. His voice rose to a yell: "Where can I find the crawling swine? If he's too yellow to fight with guns, we'll use knives or clubs or fists! I'll tear his black heart out and jam it down his throat clear into his stinking yellow belly! Where is he?"

Wate had turned, gun in hand now, and was striding toward the door. Candy, an arm across her throat, was pressed hard against the wall. "No. No, Wate—for God's sake, no! They'll kill you as though they were stamping on a fly. You haven't a chance. Go, while there's still time."

"That's swell," Wate bellowed. "I feel like being stomped on, but God help the man that tries it!"

THERE HAD been instant response to his raised voice. The sound of doors opening in the hallway outside, and footsteps running to converge on the door to Candy's room. The door flew open. Crowded in the hallway outside were at least half a dozen men. Wate caught the flash of swarthy Mexican faces, pale gamblers' faces, bearded and whiskered outlaw faces. The men piled into the room.

But not with impunity.

There was the tight mirthless grin on McCord's face as he brought his gun up and sent red fire spouting from its muzzle.

The roar of the gun thundered in the small room, covering the scream of the man who stood in wide-eyed surprise as his life and his blood gushed from a hole in his neck; the sick whine from the next in line who doubled over two hot slugs that blasted his beltbuckle clear back into his mutilated guts. The man doubled over himself and melted to the floor just in time to open the way for Wate's fourth slug. It blew away the space between the next man's eyes, leaving a great gapping hole. The man's mouth flew open a moment after he died, and the size and shape of both openings were oddly the same. He looked like a man with two mouths as he went headlong on his face.

Wate's two remaining slugs slapped into the paunch of an aproned man, obviously a bartender, and sent him down groveling in agony.

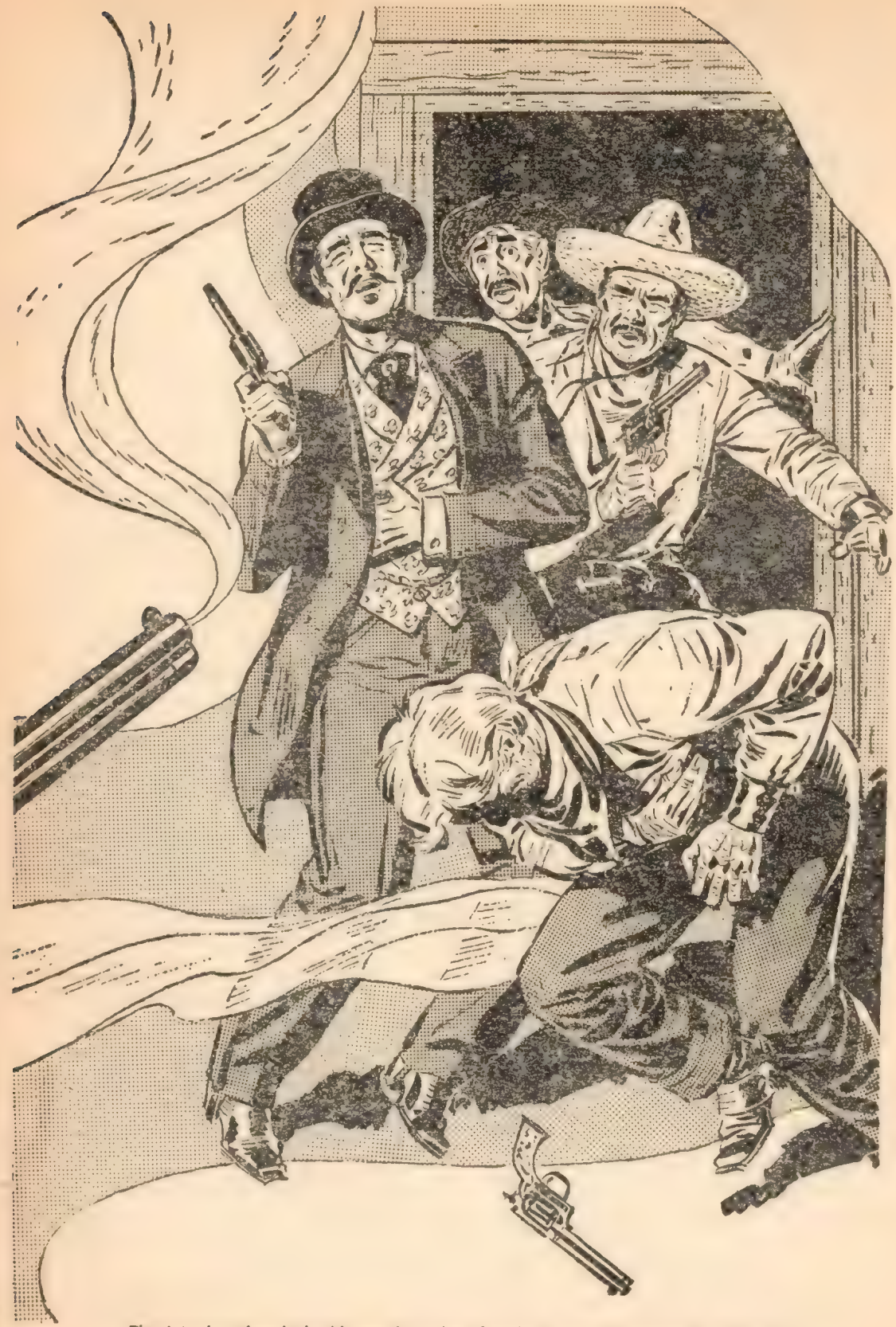
With a sweep of his arm, Wate threw his weapon at the closest head. The head belonged to a thick-lipped desperado who went down as his skull cracked with the sound of a splitting pumpkin.

Wate's advantage lay in the surprise of his attack. The intruders had come expecting to find nothing more serious than a customer possibly disgruntled over the price of an hour of love. Instead, they'd run headlong into a murdering juggernaut—a berserk killer who fought with calm and deadly precision.

Naturally, there was no generalship in the ranks of the intruders. They died like cattle in a slaughtering pen, and when Wate's ammunition was gone, they were in the act of retreating as fast as possible.

As they crowded out through the doorway, eager to get clear of this crazed killer, Wate caught the hindmost squarely on the back of the skull with the unyielding edge of a heavy chair-seat. The man went down with a single squall of pain and lay motionless.

WATE SEIZED the hand of the cowering Candy and swept her



The intruders found they'd run themselves headlong into a murdering juggernaut

out into the hall. No one obstructed the passage rearward to the roof, except a naked girl who had stepped from one of the rooms to see what was going on. She ducked back inside quickly as Wate picked Candy up and carried her out onto the roof.

"No, Wate—no! I can't go with you! Leave me here. You can never get away unless you make the break alone."

He didn't seem to hear her. As though she were weightless, he swung her over the roof edge until her feet touched the barrel by the wall. "Jump down," he said, and then he was beside her in the small area backing the building.

But it was nothing more than a trap.

The recuperative powers of the Blue Madonna thugs was astounding. Slaughtered, crushed and cut to ribbons on the second floor, they had been able to rally and get set to smother McCord as he made his exit. They were waiting for him there behind the building. He could as well have dropped off the roof into a rattlesnake pit.

He never knew how many men jumped him there in the darkness. When he became aware of their presence, he pushed Candy back against the door frame and swung a fist at the closest jaw as he reached for his knife. His fist found a jaw bone, but his other arm was locked tight against his side as he sought to slash out with his blade.

Then, they were upon him from all sides. Murderous fists, boots and knees. In such close quarters, they used neither knives nor guns, but they wrought murderous damage just the same. A knee crashed into Wate's groin, doubling him up, throwing him out of defensive position. Then, there followed a couple of minutes of incredible brutality and savageness.

Adrift in a sea of agony, Wate heard a voice screaming, imploring, even commanding. Candy's voice: "No! No! Stop it, I tell you. Queen wouldn't want him killed. He was only drunk—looking for a good time!"

Oddly, there was a break in the ranks bearing him down. A pause, as though from surprise. Another voice, low pitched, but tinged with wry amusement: *"Carramba, Senorita!* A good time, you tell us. With a half dozen dead in as many moments, one would say this madman has enjoyed himself to the limit. *Madre Dias!* I would hate to meet him in a serious mood."

"Take him to the Justice," Candy was urging feverishly. "Let the Justice sentence and hang him. Would not a hanging be more to your liking?"

SUDDENLY, McCord became aware of the true temper around him. These men, strangely enough, were not in a vicious mood. In his dazed mind, he sought an answer, and could only decide that there was no brotherhood among outlaws of this type. The dead meant nothing to those still alive. These men, while seeking each other's company, played, lone hands and had no feeling for the dead ones. They did not know, of course, who he was. Candy's words had indicated this. He was to them merely a stranger whom they would enjoy seeing at the end of a rope. The hanging, no doubt, would be good fun. Either that, or Candy was the voice of authority in this place. She'd said Queen wouldn't want him dead!

As he was jerked roughly to his feet, McCord found himself again face to face with the unanswered question: Why was Queen loathe to deal out death to his relentless pursuer? It was beyond McCord, and he shook his

head groggily as he was forced along through the dark passage toward the street. Somewhere in that areaway, there in the darkness, McCord felt soft hair brushing against his bloody face and heard Candy's whisper: "The Justice will hang you, Wate. He's had six men hung in the last two weeks. I can't protect you from him, so you've got to escape. Make a break for it, Wate! All I got you was a little time."

Then, Candy was gone and McCord was being pushed and dragged up the street. The residents of this town—a town well inured to violence and the sight of blood—stopped to stare at the bloody beaten thing that was Wate McCord. They were used to gory sights, but they'd never seen anything quite like this. McCord stumbled along trying to clear his mind and to draw on his reserve of strength. But a break-away, under the circumstances, was impossible. He could already feel the hangman's rope tight around his neck.

JUSTICE of the Peace Calloway held court in his office. He sat at his desk while the defendant and the complainants crowded the space beyond the crude railing. He had a gavel with which he pounded the desk and stilled the babbling of the men who'd brought Wate before him.

"Quiet down now, or I'll fine the lot of you for contempt of court. We'll have dignity in here or, by God, I'll know the reason why."

The talking stopped, and Calloway hit the desk again. "This court is now in session. Speak up, somebody—" He pointed his gavel at the ruffian who was clutching Wate's right arm. "—you. State the complaint."

The man grinned happily. "Why, sure, Your Honor. This jasper ain't fit to live with decent folks. He comes in and starts shooting up the place for no reason at all. Kills four or five men that had no grudge against him at all. We want to see this hombre hanging by his neck, but the girl—" The man glanced around and seemed surprised that Candy was not present. "—the girl she wants it done legal-like, and we ain't got no objections."

"Kills four or five men in what place?" Calloway demanded, glowering at Wate.

"In the Blue Madonna, Your Honor. He pulled his gun in one of the upstairs rooms."

McCord was certain that he saw an immediate change in Calloway. The scowl remained on the man's face, but it appeared to become less personal, more abstract.

"Bill Queen's place," Calloway said to no one in particular.

But immediately the tenor of the affair changed. Calloway turned his scowl on the crew of vicious complainants. "What was he doing in the room?"

"He was there with one of the girls"

"Did he kill the girl?"

"No. He started yelling and we went in—"

That seemed to cause indignation at the bench. Calloway's frown deepened. "You broke in on him then? Is that it?"

"We sure did. He started blasting—right into us."

"Where's the evidence?" Calloway demanded.

The big man on Wate's right asked, "Evidence? What evidence?"

"You said he killed four or five men. You don't expect me to take your word for that. The court's got to see the evidence with its own eyes."

"Then come on over and look at them. They're spread all over the upstairs hall, if they ain't been hauled out yet."

"That's contempt," Calloway roared, banging the desk. "It's beneath the dignity of the court to be seen in that kind of a place for whatever reason."

"Well, we sure ain't going to lug them over here."

"Then you've got no case. As a matter of fact, I'm inclined to think this man was only defending himself. You probably intended to rob him. Case dismissed."

CONSTERNATION held the men tongue-tied. They dropped McCord's arms and stood staring at Calloway, The ringleader muttered, "Well, for—"

"Silence," Calloway bellowed. He banged the gavel. "Clear the court now and leave the prisoner in my charge. I'll investigate further in the morning."

"You'll do some talking to Queen, I'm thinking," the ring leader growled.

"I'll talk to Queen any time. Now, clear the court!"

To McCord, it was miraculous that they did as they were ordered. The last to go was the big man who'd done the talking. As he went out, he had the last word: "I got a hunch you'll swing from a pole yourself, Calloway."

Then, McCord was alone with the Justice of the Peace.

Calloway inspected him critically. "They sure gave you what for, young fellow. Better come in the back room and clean up."

McCord grinned from sheer relief. He did not know by what process he'd escaped death, but he took his new lease on life with relish.

While McCord cleaned himself up in the backroom of Calloway's "court", the self-styled Justice sat watching Wate's every move.

Conscious of the close scrutiny, Wate said, "Looks to me as though you went out on a limb. I can't figure out why, but I'm grateful."

Calloway indicated a bottle and a couple of glasses on a table nearby. "Better have a couple of stiff ones," he said. "You look like you need them."

McCord poured raw liquor into his stomach, and welcomed the bite of the vicious stuff.

"If I'm not mistaken," Calloway said, "you're the jasper who tried to throw down on Bill Queen in front of the hotel."

"That's right."

"And that's why you aren't hanging by your neck about now."

"I don't get it."

"I want Queen, too."

"Oh—I see."

"I thought you would." Calloway leaned back in his chair and put his big feet up on the table. "I won't beat around the bush," he said. "If you've got any brains, you know I'm here because I'm smart enough to get by with it, and for no other reason. It's a pretty good deal, and I don't want to get pushed out."

"Queen's trying to do that?"

"Not exactly. That is, not yet, but I'm smart enough to know that he will. I'm like a horsefly buzzing around Queen's ears. That's our relative size and strength. The only thing in my favor is that I've got brains and Queen hasn't. I can figure his course before he knows what it is himself. So I know he's going to have to put me out of business before long—know it before he does."

"That little act you put on out there will just about cinch your finish, won't it?"

CALLOWAY considered this. "Maybe—maybe not. It all depends on which way the cat jumps."

"The cat?"

"Meaning you. I stuck my neck out—sure—but I did it on a gamble. I'm betting you'll get Queen."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"I figure a jasper who'll gun down five men in a dive like the Blue Madonna, is a jasper who's worth a bet. Anyhow, I'm staking my future on you. Otherwise, I'd be backed against the wall in a month, anyhow."

McCord dropped into a chair at the other side of the table. "Tell me about Bill Queen. What do you know about him."

"A plenty bad one. He played the war back east for all it was worth. Joined the Union forces early and got caught up with stealing supplies. He was supposed to face a firing squad, but he escaped and then tried to join up with the South. They wouldn't have him.

"He owns the Blue Madonna, and spends his time raiding all over the west. Understand he got back from a trip up in Missouri and Kansas not long ago. Brought a girl back with him, I heard."

"I can tell you some more. Plenty more—"

Calloway shrugged. "I'm not interested. Why waste time. All I want to know is: Can you get Queen?"

"I fully intend to get Queen."

Calloway got to his feet. "Then start doing it. But you're on your own, son. If you miss the next time, I won't be able to do anything for you. In fact, I'm going to drop out of sight for a few days until this little affair blows over."

"I'm on my own," McCord agreed. "Thanks for what you've done for me so far."

"Don't thank me," Calloway said, a trifle coldly now. "I work for my own interests at all times. If you ever get in my way, I'll see you hung."

McCord grinned. "Thanks anyway," he said, and walked out into the street. He went carefully, his mind and hand poised for action. But no one was waiting for him. There were no roaring guns. He went down the board walk to the hotel.

Upstairs, he paused before Patricia's door; almost knocked, then changed his mind. A few minutes later, he was bedded down in his own room, sound asleep.

HE OPENED his eyes when the knock came—pushed them open with effort—to find dawn coming in through the blinds. The knock was repeated. McCord got out of bed and pulled on his pants. He lit the lamp, picked up his gun from the stand, and called, "Come on in."

The door opened slowly—first a small crack, then wide enough to admit the slight body of Neal. The little man had all the manner of a small boy moving toward a jam closet. He entered the room, then turned his back on McCord in order to look up and down the hall before closing the door.

Inside finally, he came across the room and sat down on the bed beside McCord. Now, the latter saw that he had a pad of paper and a pencil in his hands. McCord watched curiously, noting the conspiratorial air about Neal, the tense, eager light in his expressive eyes.

Without further ceremony, Neal wrote swiftly on the pad: *You want to kill Queen?*

McCord blinked in surprise. "That's right."

Again Neal wrote on the pad: *Come with me. I'll show you how to do it.*

McCord's first reaction was one of suspicion. "I'll get Queen in my own way. I don't need any help."

Neal's face fell. He wrote feverishly: *You do need help. Believe me. I know.*

"How can you help me?"

I found out something so I went to Queen and made a deal. I agreed to turn you and Patricia over to him—to lure you out to Bob's adobe so all he'd have to do is come and get you.

McCord's face darkened. His hands reached toward Neal's throat. Then he controlled himself. "Go on with it. Write it down, and write fast," he growled.

Neal's pencil flew over the pad: *I told him I'd do it for money—that I'd have you and Patricia tied up waiting for him. That's what he thinks, but you won't be tied up. He'll come all alone and you'll be waiting for him.*

Neal finished writing and looked eagerly, pleadingly, at McCord while he read the words. McCord scowled, his mind racing, mulling the thing over in his mind. The distrust, however, was heavy and compelling.

"Why are you doing this. What reason do you have?" Sure that Neal was in league with Queen—somehow and for some reason—McCord wanted Queen so badly that he could not reject the idea immediately.

Never mind my reason. Just remember that you can't get Queen any other way. He knows you're after him and now he's got a dozen men waiting to kill you. This way you can get at him. He'll come alone to the place on the desert.

"He'll bring men with him," McCord said harshly. "Even if you are on the level, which I doubt, you've overlooked that point. It would be trap. We'd be like rats waiting for Queen to move in."

Neal smiled eagerly and shook his head as he wrote: *No. He'll come alone. He'll do that because he wants Patricia. He'll come alone so he can put his hands on her right then and there.*

McCord made his decision swiftly. It was based on the knowledge that Neal spoke the truth about McCord's inability to get at Queen any other way. This way, he could come to grips with the swine, trap or no trap.

"All right," he said. "I'll go with you, but Patricia stays here."

Neal shook his head violently, and wrote: *No. She's got to come with us. Queen's men will be watching when we leave town. If she isn't with us Queen won't come. At least, he won't come alone.*

McCORD KNEW he should have refused. But, with the scheme deep in his mind, its impossibilities of success apparent, he was loathe to turn it down. Suppose Neal really was on the level? Wouldn't it be as well to gamble that way as otherwise, so long as the whole thing was a gamble anyhow?

And as to harm coming to Patricia, McCord wasn't greatly worried about that. Trap or no trap, there was his confidence in his own ability. When Queen advanced on the adobe, alone or otherwise, McCord would have a rifle in his hands and a .45 Colt at his side. That would be all he needed.

The balance was tipped by Patricia herself. A light knock and she was in the room dressed for a ride. "Neal told me we were going to Bob's place," she said. "The three of us. I'm ready, but why are we going?"

She has absolute confidence in Neal, McCord thought. Then, he realized he was wrong. The realization came as he looked into Patricia's beautiful eyes. They were trained on him, not on Neal. And the confidence radiating from them was directed at himself, not the thin little mute.

For a moment, he looked at her silently. A gorgeous morsel she would make for the stalking, bestial Queen. Queen would strip her without mercy and turn her into the lost beaten thing Candy had become.

But, on the other hand, she was wonderful bait—the finest bait in the world to dangle before a shark like Queen.

"Yes," McCord said. "We're going to the adobe. I've got to meet a man there. Let's get going."

Neal brought the horses and they rode out of the still sleeping town, the hooves of their three animals making soft echoes in the street.

If Queen or his men were watching, they remained hidden. Apparently, no one saw them but a drunk lying on the board walk. He opened one eye as they passed. Then, he closed it and went back to sleep.

McCord's feeling as they approached the adobe was one of extreme tension. Just outside of rifle range, he commanded a halt. With a grim look in Neal's direction—a look promising dire payment for treachery—McCord went on alone.

He approached the adobe from an angle which would give a gunman waiting inside the poorest possible shot. He dropped from his horse in the shelter on the wall and approached the doorway. There, he got set and leaped inside, gun ready. There was no one to dispute his way. A check on the shed revealed that it, too, was untenanted.

McCord waved a hand, bidding his two companions to come forward. As they approached, McCord stood scowling at the diminutive Neal. He couldn't figure the man. So far, there was every indication that he'd been sincere in this coup. But there were so many unanswered questions. So much to be explained.

They rode up side by side, Neal and Patricia. Still scowling, McCord stepped between the horses to help Patricia down. Maybe Neal was on the level, he admitted to himself.

THEN, THE sky fell on him. Swift unconsciousness—the oblivion he'd already experienced since he'd started his long trek toward the Nations.

He came to with a splitting head. He opened his eyes to find himself bound tight to a chair with turn after turn of thin, tough rope. With his first thought came the certainty that escape from the chair was impossible.

Now, his eyes cleared, to focus on other objects in the room. Patricia, bound as tightly as he himself to another chair. Her eyes were wide with wonder; stark fear was mirrored in her face.

Nearby, squatting down against a wall, was Neal. He kept his bright eyes trained steadily upon his prisoners. There was a slight smile on his face—a look of almost childish happiness, as though he were eliciting praise for what he'd done.

"Neal hit you," Patricia said in a dull stunned voice. "He knocked you unconscious when you reached up to help me. Then, he dragged me down from the horse and tied me up. I—I guess I was just too surprised to resist until it was too late. Then, he tied you up."

McCord stared at Neal and felt the red waves of rage rising within himself; rage at Neal, of course, but more so at himself for his own gullibility and stupidity.

"I've talked to him," Patricia went on. "Begged and pleaded with him, but he just sits there and pays no attention."

"He's gone mad," McCord said. "It's a waste of time talking to anyone as far gone as he is." Then, he belied his own statement by directing words to the placid Neal. "Look—can't you visualize? I don't know what made you do this, but you certainly must be able to see what Queen will do to Patricia. And you can't want that to happen. Let her go. Get her out of here and leave me for Queen, if you must. Just get her back to town and safety."

Neal smiled up at the two with a vacuity of expression that made McCord's blood run cold. With a quick look at Patricia, McCord took desper-

ate measures. Speaking clearly and without haste, he went into detail as to what Patricia's fate would be. Steeling himself to the girl's reaction to his raw words and frank statements, he saw the color flame into her face, saw the torturing embarrassment and sheer agony in her eyes as he spat out in detail the picture of what her fate was to be at the hands of Queen. Somehow, he had to break through the vaccuum around Neal's mind. Somehow, he had to reach and sting Neal's chivalry and decency.

BUT IT was no use. He listened to the details of what Queen would do to Patricia, seemed to be considering the portrait McCord painted of her naked, helpless, brutalized future. Then, he got to his feet, head cocked in a listening attitude.

McCord heard the sound, too. A horseman approaching. Then, heavy footsteps and Bill Queen strode into the room. After the briefest glance at McCord, he turned his lascivious eyes on the cringing Patricia. The eyes reflected perfectly his intentions toward her.

Then, he looked at McCord. "Seems like history repeats itself, McCord." He glanced smugly about the room. "Scenery's a little different, but everything else is the same."

Patricia's voice came—still flat, dull. "How did you make him do it? What did you give him that could turn him against me this way, after he's done so much for me?"

Queen motioned toward Neal with his head. "You mean him, honey?" The leering desperado laughed. "Why, it was his idea." His leer deepened, and he rubbed the thumb and a finger of one hand together. "Gold, honey. *Dinero*. Money. He sold you to me by the pound, so to speak." Then, with a nod toward McCord, "And he threw the Kansan in as sort of a bonus."

Queen threw back his head and laughed. His eyes, bright and feverish as they rested on Patricia, closed for a moment at the height of his mirth.

At that moment, Neal struck.

From a position slightly behind and to the left of Queen, he brought a short club, which he'd had concealed in his sleeve, over in a vicious arc. The club cracked against Queen's skull, bringing the man down without a word.

Then, as McCord and Patricia stared in amazement, Neal went truly mad. He changed in that brief instant to a drooling, eager animal. With surprising strength, he grabbed Queen by the shoulders and dragged him through the doorway into the kitchen. During this process, he seemed oblivious of the prisoners. He was in a world of his own—a world with only two occupants—himself and Bill Queen.

The next half an hour was to be stamped forever on the minds of McCord and Patricia Morley—a half hour crammed with such vivid horror as to be unforgettable. With the body of Queen beyond their view, they saw Neal flit past the doorway carrying another length of rope. Then, he too vanished.

But there were sounds: Neal's weird yammering, his crooning, wordless voice giving out a sort of mad, obscene lullaby as he went about whatever he was doing.

THEN, QUEEN'S roar of rage when his consciousness returned abruptly. But soon the rage and defiance were gone, giving place to a squall of pain overshot with Neal's high-pitched laughter.

From then on, it was starkly sickening; something inconceivable even in the wildest nightmare. Queen's deep voice roaring with pain, to pitch higher and higher as the sounds became

those of a suffering wild animal rather than of a man.

Sickness, pure and unadulterated, was in Patricia's face as her eyes pleaded with McCord.

"It's no use," McCord said. "He's beyond us; beyond reason." Then, more to drown out the hideous sounds with his own voice than to explain, he said, "It's easy to see the truth now. Queen was the man who mutilated Neal back in Georgia. Neal wanted Queen himself. No doubt, he spied on the adobe back at the way-station and took a shot at Queen. He missed, and you had to run for it.

"Then, when we got to Santa Blanca and Neal found his enemy so close, he really went mad with a thirst for vengeance. He knocked me down when I tried to kill Queen there in front of the hotel, because he wanted Queen for himself. Then, his mad mind came up with this idea and—well, it worked.

"It's—it's horrible," Patricia whispered. "I can't—"

"Don't blame him too much," McCord said. "Remember, he's not sane anymore. He's not the same man you knew and trusted."

The ghastly sounds from the kitchen had faded out now, and for a moment there was complete silence. Then, Neal appeared in the doorway. Again, he had changed. The madness seemed to have faded. He was carrying a knife in one hand—a knife gouted and dripping with blood. It fell to the floor as he stood looking at the trapped pair. Neal's eyes were empty now—dull and devoid of expression. He was a picture of sated desire—revenge carried to the ultimate—a weary, bewildered, beaten man. His revenge was on his lips, and the taste was of ashes.

Slowly, he picked McCord's .45 from where it had fallen to the floor. Then, looking vacantly about him, he saw and retrieved the horrible knife. Listlessly, he applied its edge to the cords binding Wate, then to those holding Patricia helpless.

This done, he turned and walked slowly from the room. After clearing themselves of bondage, McCord and Patricia rushed to the door of the adobe. Out beyond, in the sunlight, Neal was walking straight away into the desert.

Patricia called out, "Neal—Neal! Come back!"

At the sound, the unhappy man turned and stood motionless for a moment. Then, he quietly raised the gun to his head.

The sound of the shot and Patricia's scream mingled in the clear desert air. She flung herself into McCord's arms, and he led her slowly back into the adobe. "Don't look," he said, as they passed the ripped, slashed and mutilated body of Bill Queen. But the admonition was unnecessary. Patricia's face was buried against Wate's chest.

IT SEEMED there had been enough drama here in the dessert; enough and overflowing. But there was to be still more. Five minutes later, there came again the sound of an approaching horse. McCord left Patricia in the front room and came out to the door. He saw Candy Thompson, booted and clad for the saddle, approaching at a gallop.

She pulled her horse to a rearing halt, flung out of the saddle and ran to the adobe. Seeing McCord, her eyes filled with fear. "What happened?" she cried. "I heard about it, and came as fast as I could to stop him. What happened?"

"Don't go inside," McCord said gently. "Stay out here."

The fear deepened. Candy flung herself past him and into the kitchen. There, she stood frozen for what seemed an interminable time, staring down at the horrible thing on the floor.

McCord never knew what prompted him to put his hands on Candy.

Possibly some deep instinct of self-preservation. Anyhow, by the time she found words, he was holding her tight in his arms.

She tried to spin around. Her head turned, and she was staring with horror up into McCord's face. "You did this to him—you!"

Before he could answer, she had become a raging, fighting fury. In a way, she had gone insane, just as Neal had earlier. "You son of a bitch!" she screamed. "I'll kill you! I'll cut you to pieces just the way you did him!"

McCord's muscles reacted without command to hold her helpless—hold her there with her face, revealing sheer, naked hatred, a few inches from his own.

"Candy—for God's sake, Candy! What's happened to you?"

"Happened?" she screamed back. "I met a *man*, that's all. A better man than you could be in a thousand years!"

"Candy!"

SHE WANTED to kill him, and if that couldn't be done, to hurt him. "Yes—a man" she spat. "A half hour after Bill Queen carried me away from the grove that night, he sent his men on ahead and dragged me into some bushes. In there, I fought him tooth and nail for a long time." She smiled up into McCord's face, relishing the pain she saw there, deliberately forming each word into a knife to stab into his mind.

"We fought until he had me stripped naked, and he was bleeding where I'd bitten through his ear and his lips. We fought until I slipped away from him and started to run.

"But then, something happened. Just in one instant it happened, and I stopped because I knew I wanted him as much as he wanted me.

"So I went back," Candy screamed. "Do you understand that? I went back naked into his arms, because I suddenly realized I'd met a *man*. Not a wishy-washy country bumpkin that's got red ears and fell over his feet every time he asked me for a kiss. A real man, and we had each other there in the bushes while you were eating dirt back in the grove."

Candy saw how she was torturing Wate, and strove to push the goad in deeper: "When we were through and came out of those bushes, he hadn't conquered me—I'd conquered him. He was mine, do you understand? Mine—body and soul—and I was his."

The girl stopped talking from sheer lack of breath. Still held in McCord's iron grip, she was panting and glaring hatred up into his face.

"I didn't kill Queen," McCord said quietly. "I'd have killed him if I'd had the chance—sure—but not that way. Queen's past caught up with him. Once, he mutilated a man—cut his tongue out—and the man found him and arranged this trap with me as bait. He did this to Queen, and then killed himself. He lies dead out beyond the corral."

She was silent, staring into his face.

He said, "Candy, regardless of appearances, don't you know I couldn't do that to a man, no matter how much I hated him?"

Candy collapsed like a rag doll as all the hatred and tautness went out of her. She slipped from McCord's grasp and went to the floor where she sat huddled. There was a time of silence, broken only by her quiet weeping. Then she looked up. "Yes, Wate. I know that. I'm sorry. I went crazy. I'm sorry I hurt you—wanted to."

"But—that's the way it was?"

Candy nodded, dropping her eyes. "Yes—that's the way it was."

His voice was low, miserable: "But we can go back. We can start over—"

SHE WAS on her feet now, her hand on his, compassion in her voice

as she smiled at him. "No, Wate—it's no good. I'm no good, and in a way, it's lucky you found it out. I've had a taste of the wild free life, and it's my life. I don't know where I'll end up, but I'll travel the road with my eyes open, and I'll have no regrets when I come to the end of it."

He was staring into her eyes, and a quick expression of knowing came upon his face. "It was you who saved my life back there by the creek. You were riding with Queen and Antonio, and you kept Queen from killing me and the others."

Candy nodded, gave him a small, swift smile. "I told you I'd...conquered Bill Queen. We searched the wagon to see if there was any gold, but I wouldn't let him kill anyone."

"He chased the wagon because Neal took a shot at him from the darkness at the way-station?"

"Somebody took a shot at him. It was the man who killed him."

McCord nodded.

"I didn't hear about what was going on here until after Bill left Santa Blanca. I got wind of it and came out here to stop him. I was too late."

"Yes—you were too late."

Candy turned slowly toward the door. "Goodbye, Wate," she said.

"Goodbye."

Then, she was gone. Wate did not watch her ride away. He turned into the other room.

He never saw Candy Thompson again.

"I'M GOING back," Wate said. "Back to Kansas. I'm not a gunman by hand or at heart. I'm a farmer. I belong in Kansas."

Patricia said, "You loved her a great deal, didn't you?"

"I don't know. I thought I did. Yes, I loved her."

"Do you still love her?"

"I don't know."

"May I ride with you—at least as far as Kansas?"

"Certainly. What are you going to do then?"

Patricia smiled serenely. "The same thing I'm going to start doing right now. Make you forget Candy Thompson."

She began by kissing him.

THE END

THE NIGHT WATCH

By Jon Barry

WHEN IN Indian country, the guard who watched over a sleeping camp had a hard and dangerous task. The night watch could not walk about, nor stand. That would make him an easy target for a silent arrow shot by a foe who had carefully snaked near in the grass. The guard had to prevent, if possible, the stealthy approach of any Indian to a point where the camp could be observed, or worse, placed at the mercy of the savages by a well-directed arrow at the guard.

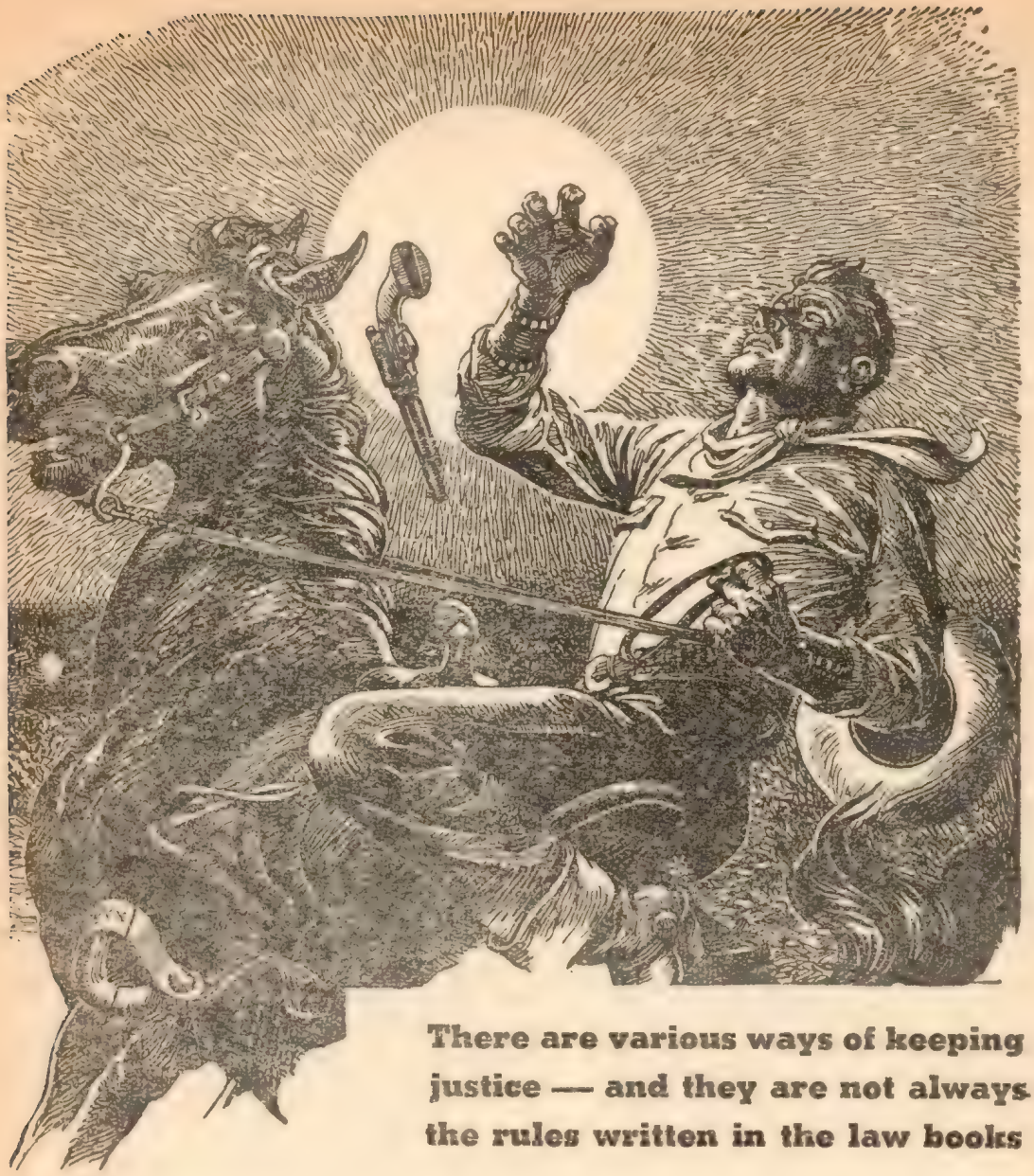
So wily were the Indians, so small were any signs of their presence, that the night watch had to keep all his senses in the utmost state of preparedness, in order to detect the nearness of an enemy. He did this by lying motionless at full length on the ground, his chest on the earth, elbows far apart with wrists brought together, head back, chin supported on his hands. His ears were open, his eyes everywhere, and every nerve and muscle in his body was tense and alert. In this way, he could "sky" any object approaching the camp, and at the same time catch any movement or waving of grass tops which would indicate someone or something moving nearby. Besides, with ears near the ground, he could hear sounds which would be inaudible if he were standing up.

The night watch maintained this position as nearly motionless as humanly possible. When tired muscles and taut nerves rebelled, he would shift his position a little, slowly and cautiously. Two hours was long enough for a man to stand guard; at the end of this period, he was only too glad to relinquish his duty to another, and to fall into deep sleep.

DON'T STAIN THAT BADGE

By Jonathan Craig

Instantly, he was on his feet and triggering, putting the lead exactly where he wanted it



There are various ways of keeping justice — and they are not always the rules written in the law books

HE HAD BEEN careless. He realized that now as he stood there in the doorway, staring into his hotel room at the box-shouldered man who faced him over a cocked .44. The man's face was dark and hard-lined in the yellow wash of lamp light, and in his broad hand the gun looked almost small. "This can be friendly, Lou," he said, "if you'll have it that way. Close the door."

Lou Holland stepped into the stored heat of the room, a tall, loose-boned man with wide-set, smoke-gray eyes. A deputy's star glinted dully against a faded denim shirt. He closed the door quietly behind him, making no sudden movements, keeping his fingers carefully away from the bone handle of the Colt thonged low on his right thigh. He moved across the room to the dresser and leaned his hip against it and studied the dark-faced man.

He said, "It's been a long time, Stoner."

Stoner nodded, said nothing. The .44 was trained on Holland's belt buckle.

Holland said, "I reckon you figure on a deal."

"I ain't been waiting here just to say howdy."

"How'd you know I was on your tail?"

Stoner shrugged. "Friend of mine happened to be back there in Braggtown about the time they sent you after me. It figured anyway, seeing you know more about me than anybody else the sheriff could get for the job."

Holland wet his lips. "It isn't a job I asked for—or liked, Stoner."

A corner of Stoner's wide mouth lifted in a half smile. "Maybe so. But you always was a blind one when it came to duty."

For a while, neither man said anything. Sounds of Saturday night revelry boomed up from the street below. Holland stood there leaning against the dresser, quite motionless, listening to men's laughter and the grating fiddle and piano music pouring from the saloons, and he thought, I was a fool to walk into this. He said, "What kind of deal you got in mind?"

STONER SAID, "I want you should go back to Braggtown. And I want you should take something with you." His free hand slid inside his blue silk shirt and withdrew a small buckskin bag. He tossed it across the room to the dresser. "There's considerable money there, Lou. I want you should take it to my brother. A lunger like him ain't got long, but money'll make it a heap easier for him. Maybe, with money, he can get the right doc. He might even live."

Holland thought of Stoner's brother, a harmless shell of a man, sick in the lungs and not too bright.

"I saw you ride into town this morning," Stoner said softly. "I could have gunned you then. But I got this idea, and when I saw you go out to eat, I came up here to wait for you." The gun barrel moved in a tiny circle. "You got a choice, Lou. You can do me a mighty big favor, and save your own skin." He shrugged. "Or, you can be bull-headed, and get gut-shot."

Holland sucked in his breath, let it out slowly. Where'd you get the money?"

"Cards. Every dime of it, in case it worries you any."

Holland pushed his hands down flat on the dresser top and stared hard into Stoner's pale yellow eyes. He said, "You saved my life once, Jeff, and I never forgot it. Eight years isn't long enough for a man to forget something like that. We were buddies then, and the man you shot was a paid killer and deserved what he got. But that killing did something to you. You turned killer yourself. For eight years now, you've lived by the gun. You aren't the same ranny that saved my life."

"You aiming to give me a sermon, Lou?"

"You'd kill again. Like you killed old Ben Lacey in Braggtown last month, because he wouldn't open his store till for you."

Stoner's low voice went even softer: "And like I'll kill you, Lou, if you ain't smart enough to do what I say."

And then there was silence again. Holland felt the sweat crawling down his ribs and along the insides of his arms. A breeze rattled against the drawn window shade, picked at the grimy curtains. In a room down the corridor, someone strummed a guitar

and began to sing, sadly and beautifully, in Spanish.

"Make up your mind, lawman," Stoner said.

Holland moved his hand slowly across the top of the dresser. His fingers closed around the buckskin bag. The flesh across the smooth planes of his face was tight and hot and dry.

He said, "I'll give the money to your brother, Jeff."

Stoner's eyes narrowed a little. "I've got your honor on that?"

"Yes."

Stoner jerked his head toward the door. "Then let's vamoose. You first." The Colt went into its holster, but Stoner's hand stayed on the handle.

HOLLAND WENT through the door and down the stairs and along the crowded board walk to the livery, hearing Stoner's measured breathing just behind him.

They waited until the hostler saddled their horses, and to Lou Holland the minutes dragged by like hours, knowing that each one of them drew him closer to the thing he must do, the only thing he could do.

He rode out of town, with Stoner keeping his horse a few feet behind. The moon was full, and here in the flat country it was almost as light as day. A night breeze swept across the plain and cooled the sweat on Holland's face, and he filled his lungs deeply. It was almost time.

He thought, If it weren't for Stoner, I wouldn't be alive tonight. I owe him my life, and because of that I can't take his. But unless he's stopped, he'll kill again.... It was mixed up, but it was there and he could not escape it.

Holland ground his teeth tight together, braced himself an instant in the stirrups, and then he threw himself out of the saddle and down beneath the belly of his horse. He heard Jeff Stoner's startled, angry yell and heard the roar of his Colt. And then he was triggering his own gun—taking time to aim, putting his lead exactly where he wanted it.

He heard Stoner scream with pain, and he watched the killer's gun fly from his hand in a long silver arc and thud into the dust as the man sprawled out of his saddle. The spooked horses bolted then, and the two men were left facing each other.

Stoner was whimpering now, holding his right elbow with his left hand. His yellow eyes, boring into Holland's were those of a trapped and wounded lobo. An unintelligible stream of curses choked from his peeled-back lips.

Holland scooped up Stoner's Colt and walked toward him. "I'm keeping this, Jeff," he said tonelessly. "You'll be able to use that arm again, sometime, but not to draw a gun." His throat was tight, and his stomach felt as if he were going to be sick. "I had to stop the killer in you, Jeff." He turned then and went after the horses.

When he brought them back, Stoner was still standing in the same spot, his face contorted with pain.

Holland led Stoner's horse to him. "Get aboard," he said, almost gently, and helped Stoner into the saddle. He stood a moment, looking back toward the lights of the town. Then, he reached into his levis and took out a small roll of bills. He shoved them into Stoner's boot, not looking up at him.

He said, "Ride back to town and see a doc. Then, ride out of this country, Stoner, as far as you can get." He slapped the horse on the rump.

He watched horse and rider until

they were lost in the shadows. Then, he swung aboard his own horse and turned its head, and the animal started toward Braggtown.

TWO DAYS later, Lou Holland walked into the sheriff's office in Braggtown and crossed the room to the grizzled, hawk-faced oldster who sat with his boots up on the spur-scarred desk, reading a sheaf of wanted dodgers.

He said, "Well, I've come back, Sheriff."

Sheriff Wade Satterlee's boots came off the desk, hit the rough pine floor with a bang. His age-seamed face lighted, and he grinned expectantly. "You get him, Lou?"

Holland nodded. "Down in the low country."

Satterlee ran a thumb nail along the line of his beard-stained jaw. "Was there gunplay, Lou?"

"A little." He lifted Stoner's Colt from his belt and pushed it across the desk to the sheriff. "He won't be using this again."

Satterlee looked at the gun a long moment. "I was sort of hoping you'd bring the varmint back, Lou. I've been stretching a rope for him, you know."

"I know," Holland said. "But the cards didn't fall that way." He shifted his weight uneasily, wondering just how he was going to say what came next.

The sheriff's eyes searched his face anxiously as he said, "Something wrong, son?"

Holland took out the small buckskin bag Jeff Stoner had given him, and put it on the desk beside Stoner's gun.

"This belongs to Stoner's brother, Sheriff," he said. "Put it in the bank for him. Dole it out to him whenever he needs it, for doctor bills and such."

Satterlee frowned, then nodded. "All right, Lou. I won't ask questions when they ain't wanted. It'll be done just the way you say. You can rest assured on that."

SLOWLY, HOLLAND'S fingers came up to the star on his shirt. His fingers fumbled a little as he unpinned it. He put it down on the desk, a little apart from the buckskin bag and the gun.

The sheriff's eyes widened questioningly.

"I'm not the man for this, Sheriff," Holland said. Then, he turned quickly and strode from the office. He slipped his horse's lines from the hitch rail and mounted and rode away from Braggtown forever without a backward look.

And as he rode, he thought of how law and justice sometimes had to be just what a man made of them. It had been justice back there when he had stopped a killer, but it was not the kind of justice that was written in the law books. A lawman was supposed to keep the laws—not make them—and that was why Holland knew he could no longer wear the star.

He leaned forward in the saddle, patted his horse's damp neck. He said, "How do you figure it, Old Timer? I had my duty as a lawman, but I had another duty, too—to the man who once saved my life. I tried my best to do right by both of them."

The horse whinnied, moving smoothly and powerfully beneath him, taking him he knew not where, but taking him there with peace in his heart and with a conscience that was clear.

THE END

MEXICAN AMBUSH

By Carter T. Wainwright

IN HIS fascinating reminiscences, Bill Breakenridge tells some extraordinary tales of courage, so matter of factly that you can't help but like the man. He was one of the few Western sheriffs to whom the Law really meant something and to whom a human life, even if it belonged to a criminal, was a sacred thing.

It seems that the Vulture Mine in Arizona was managed by a man named Gribble. Gribble, with the help of two companions, was carting a load of bullion into the assay office. It weighed forty pounds and represented a sizable fortune. As they were pack-horsing the gold into town, three Mexicans ambushed them, shot them down cold-bloodedly, and took off with the gold.

Breakenridge formed a posse as soon as the bad news came out. By their tracks, the approximate path of the murderers was noted. The Mexicans had split up, buried the gold, intending to return later. Two of the Mexicans were quickly caught. The third, however, decided to double-cross his partners, for when Breakenridge reached the burial spot, the gold had been dug up and the Mexican had gone. But his tracks were clear. The posse hurried after him, riding high into mountain territory.

They came upon a small camp. Upon questioning the men, they found out that a Mexican had been there just a few minutes before with a pack-laden horse. And that was it. They soon spotted the man abandoning his horse and climbing into rock-studded steepnesses looking for a better hide-out.

Bill Breakenridge climbed after him. Even though he had a number of chances to shoot—as testified by eyewitnesses—he tried to take the man alive. But when he got within about fifteen feet of the Mexican, the robber turned and fired with a pistol. There was nothing left for the deputy to do. He fired back and the Mexican tumbled over—dead.

The bullion was recovered and the incident closed.

This little incident, though, is illustrative of Breakenridge's whole career. He had associated with the toughest gunmen in the West, yet he never lost his humanity. Bat Masterson, Curly Bill, the Earps, all of that unholy crew did not affect his sense of decency. And that was a rare thing indeed.

POKER PARTY

By E. Bruce Yaches

IN THE summer of 1881, there occurred a poker game, the record of which makes all other poker games ever played seem like child's play.

A bunch of cattle rustlers, including men like Curly Bill, Joe Hill, Ringo, Old Man Hughes and a host of others, sold a huge herd of cattle at San Carlos to a Government contractor supplying beef for the Army. The cattle were stolen, of course, and since branding wasn't yet in general use, the Government bought innocently.

After divvying up the proceeds—which were plenty—the boys headed for Fort Thomas on the Gila River. They started a man-sized poker game in Jack O'Neill's saloon. Ringo and Joe Hill knew cards like they knew their own name. In a matter of hours, they cleaned out the majority of the boys, who immediately headed back toward Mexico to pick up more cattle and more money. But Hill and Ringo kept the game open and going for a couple of days.

Dick Lloyd, a quarrelsome cowhand, loaded to the gills with cheap rotgut, fell in with a drinking companion by the name of Mann. The two of them proceeded to get thoroughly drunk. Naturally, this led to a fight. Mann started to draw, but Lloyd was faster. He fired first and Mann dropped. Lloyd, thinking he'd killed Mann, immediately decided to get out of town. But, actually, his bullet had merely creased the back of Mann's neck, knocking him unconscious.

Lloyd got hold of a horse, and so drunk was he that he forgot momentarily what he was doing and headed back for O'Neill's saloon. With drawn guns and talking tough, he strode into the saloon. The poker game which was going full blast seemed to annoy him. Even as he went up to the table, the players, a half dozen hard-bitten men headed by Ringo, calmly drew and fired almost at once. Lloyd fell to the floor riddled through and through.

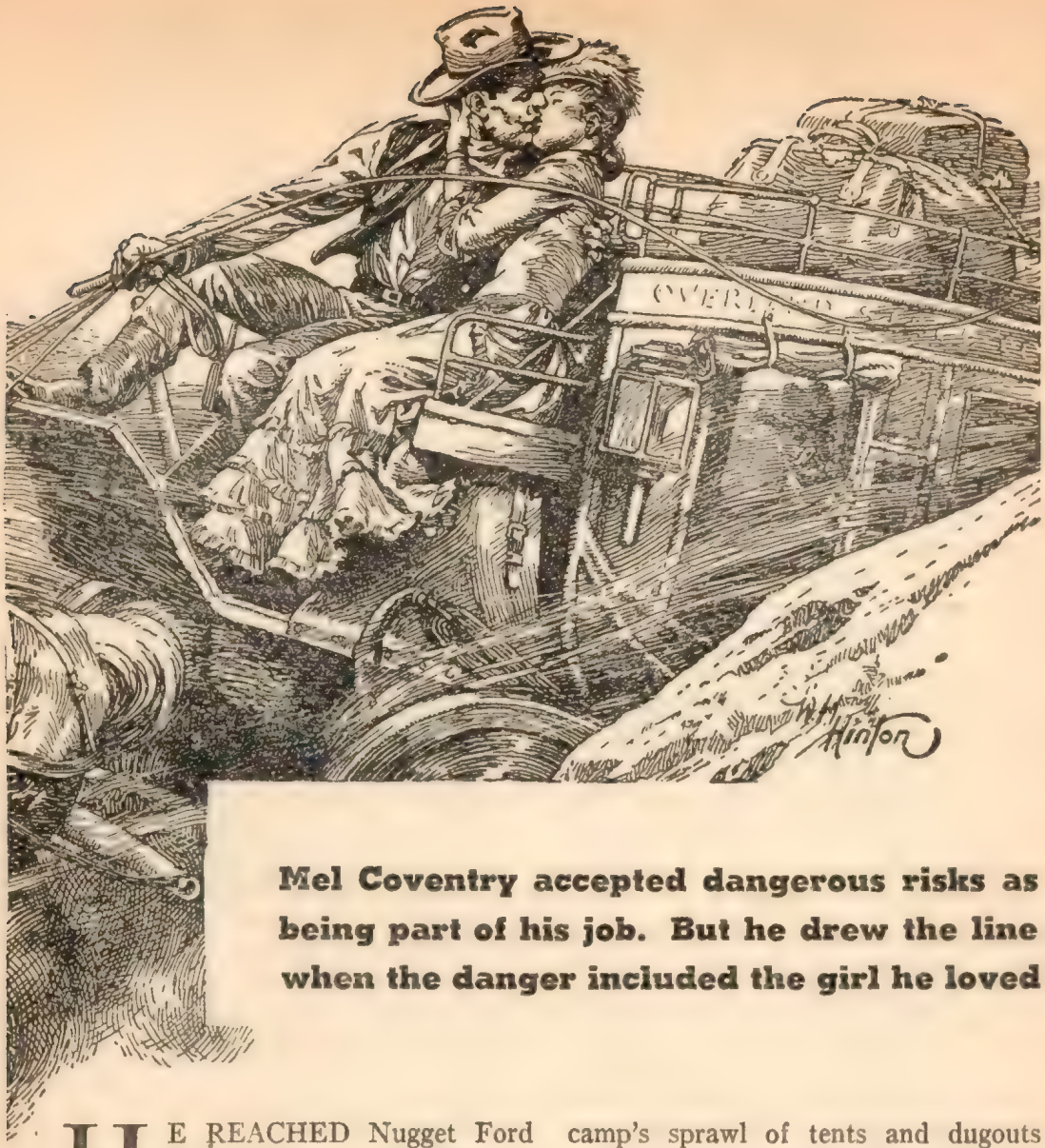
The poker game was interrupted for a moment while they hired a Mexican to dig a grave for the erstwhile noisy Lloyd. The poker players attended the brief funeral of Lloyd, dumped a half dozen empty whiskey bottles at the foot of the half-filled grave, and headed back for the poker game.

Poker was important in Fort Thomas—even more so than the death of a drunken cowboy.

HOODOO STAGE TO PIOCHE

By Walker A. Tompkins

"Denny," Mel said huskily, "I reckon this team can handle itself long enough to give you the longest kiss you ever got..."



Mel Coventry accepted dangerous risks as being part of his job. But he drew the line when the danger included the girl he loved

HE REACHED Nugget Ford with the first red shine of dawn, a tall and saddle-weary man with the gray soda of the desert crossing still lying silvery on his Stetson and the shoulders of his brushpopper jumper, the alkaline rime of it on his jaw stubble making him appear far older than his thirty years.

Even at this early hour, with only a few breakfast fires lifting their lazy smoke umbrellas above the mining camp's sprawl of tents and dugouts and frame shacks, he had avoided entering by the stage road, choosing instead a roundabout game trace through the timber. Cy Kendrick's urgent insistence that he keep his arrival secret meant that death must be lurking in Nugget Ford, a bullet with his name on it...

A special investigator for Wells-Fargo Express accepted such risks as part of his calling. Kendrick must have had a mighty important reason

for getting him sent to this remote Arizona camp, all the way from the case he had been working on in the Mother Lode of California.

Pondering that thought, the big rider raked his searching glance along the false-fronted shacks which bracketed the crooked main street like battlements, seeking the company's office where Kendrick, the Owlhorn division superintendent, would be waiting for this rendezvous.

Failing to locate the stage office, his gaze was arrested by the ornate red lettering across the clapboard facade of a building which, except for the big Mulehoof Syndicate's reduction mill which terraced the opposite slope of the gulch, was the most imposing structure in camp: CLAUDE DEXITER'S MERCANTILE & MINERS' OUTFITTING HOUSE.

He had never visited Nugget Ford before. Yet, Dexiter's establishment was as familiar to him as his own name. How many times in the past eight months had he addressed his letters to Denise Blanchard in care of Dexiter's Mercantile?

He was struck again by the coincidence that Kendrick's call for help should bring him to this one isolated speck on the frontier where his fiancee had accepted employment as bookkeeper for a prosperous trader.

"She might as well be on the moon for all the good it'll do me," he muttered bleakly, and put his horse down the stump-dotted slope toward the town.

He felt all his pent-up hungers surfacing in him, the yearnings he had known during these long months of separation accentuating his need for just the sight of Denny's amber-bright eyes, the warmth of her lips, the soft yielding pressure of her body against his.

He thought, she probably isn't even up at this hour, and knowing that even if she had been, he could not hail her for so much as a minute's chat. Cy Kendrick's telegram had made it plain that his coming to Nugget Ford must be incognito, for his own safety as well as the success of whatever assignment the division super had lined up for him.

REACHING an alley mouth at the main street, the rider glanced north and south. Sight of a red and yellow Concord coach being made up in front of a log-walled shack opposite Dexiter's store identified the local Wells-Fargo station. The fact that hostlers were even now hitching up the team, told him by what a scant margin he had won his race over the Owlhorn divide.

He pulled back into the alley he had followed, spurring his gaunted saddle pony past the rear of a row of honky-tonks and ramshackle bagnios, and off-saddled inside the Wells-Fargo barn, turning the horse into the corral there. The stable hands would attend to grooming and graining the lathered animal.

From the ammoniac reek of the barn, he followed a shadow-clotted cave through the feed shed and thus reached the back door of the express office without his arrival having been witnessed by a soul. The door was locked, as he had anticipated, and when it opened in response to his knock, he found himself facing grizzled old Cyrus Kendrick himself.

"You shaved it almighty fine, Mel," the veteran division boss greeted him. "Pioche stage leaves in ten minutes, and you're going to be handling the reins. Barely enough time to let you know what you're up against."

The rider grinned bleakly, swatting alkali dust from his flat-crowned Stetson as he followed Kendrick into the lattice-partitioned front room which served as Kendrick's ticket office.

A beefy-built man in muddy boots and a miner's red wool shirt was warming his backside at the big nickel-fendered Franklin stove, a black-bearded man with a furtive anxiety showing in his face as he stared at Kendrick's friend.

"Sam, want you to meet the Company's ace trouble-shooter, Mel Coventry," Kendrick said. "Mel, shake hands with Sam Brice. Mill boss for the Mulehoof Syndicate, which is all that keeps Nugget Ford from rotting into a ghost town."

As he shook hands with the mining man, Coventry was aware of Brice's skeptical appraisal, sensed that Brice was surprised that Wells-Fargo's top-hand detective was well on the short side of forty. Brice's eyes glinted approval, however, when they came to rest on the cedar stock of the Colt .45 which sagged in its basket-woven holster on Coventry's flank.

"Thought you'd got buffaloed at the prospect of taking our hoodoo stage out this trip, Coventry," Brice rumbled, his voice carrying the sour edge of early-morning temper. "Can't say as I'd have blamed you, at that."

"Mel's got a rep to live up to," chuckled Kendrick, waving his guest into a barrel chair by the stove's warmth. "He doesn't know what he's up against, yet. Had anything to eat, kid?"

COVENTRY settled his leaned-down bulk into the chair, knowing that he could count on little leisure today. Through the smoke-grimed window beyond the stove he had a view of Dexiter's Mercantile across the street, and the thought of leaving town without at least a glimpse of Denny Blanchard was rough to take. Especially since he might not live to get back.

"Yeah—had breakfast at midnight at the Blackrock relay shanty," Coventry said, reaching in his shirt pocket for Durham sack and papers. "Well, what's the deal, Cy?"

Kendrick rubbed his hands together briskly, remembering this quality of Coventry's—no beating around the bush, always ready to get down to brass tacks without preliminaries.

"Well, son," the division super began, "our Company holds the contract to ship Mulehoof's bullion to the railhead at Pioche. The last four shipments Brice has entrusted to Wells-Fargo's keeping have been lifted by road agents working on the Pioche Grade west of Summit Springs, to the tune of around a hundred thousand dollars. In spite of each shipment having been started with the utmost secrecy."

Mel Coventry shook tobacco into the trough of brown paper between his fingers, trying hard to concentrate on what his chief was telling him, but succeeding only in wondering if Denny Blanchard might be eating breakfast over at the Discovery Hotel about now. Not likely. The hands of the wall clock stood at nine minutes to five.

"So you're shipping bullion today—and want me to make sure it gets to the Pioche office?" Coventry asked.

Kendrick shook his head. "The box will carry a hundred pounds of iron bolts and washers, Mel. If any spies are watching the Pioche stage pull out this morning, they'll see nothing to indicate that Mulehoof is shipping ingots today. There will be no shotgun guard on this run, and you'll cache that gun you're wearing, under your seat cushion."

Coventry scowled. Had he been called all the way from Sacramento City to ride herd on a box of scrap iron?

"The stage will be held up on the Pioche Grade," Kendrick prophesied coolly, "and you will offer no resistance. You'll let 'em have the box. So far as this camp knows, you're just a relief driver, called in to substitute

for Lute Harkness, our regular jehu. He's down with pneumonia."

COVENTRY fired his cigarette and regarded Kendrick and Brice through the purling blue haze from his nostrils. "Why call me in to drive stage, then, if your bandidos will only get a box of junk for their efforts?"

Kendrick grinned. "If today's holdup follows the pattern, the desperados will wave you on. A mile or so down the road, you'll unhitch the team and turn it loose to get back to the barn at Summit on their own. All except the nigh lead horse which the relay crew at Summit will have provided you. It's saddle broke. And you'll find a sacked saddle and bridle in the rear boot."

"You're thorough," Coventry grinned.

"You'll saddle up and get back to the scene of the holdup," Kendrick continued, "while the getaway trail is still warm enough to follow. I want a line on where those bandidos go after they blow open the box. You're the only man in the Company's service who can handle a tracking job like that."

Sam Brice commented glumly, "From your advance build-up, son, you're supposed to be half bloodhound and half ferret."

Coventry turned this information over in his mind and felt a sense of anti-climax go through him. The job seemed passive enough: Just another manhunt. He asked suddenly, "How come you're so dead certain I'll get held up this run, Cy?"

"Because, Kendrick replied, "you'll be carrying a passenger whose presence aboard the stage is a tip-off to the ambushers that Mulehoof is shipping bullion this trip."

Sam Brice, noting Coventry's puzzlement, filled in the details: "You see, Coventry, on each of the four times our bullion has been choused, a woman here in town rode the Pioche stage as far as Summit Springs. We figger the bandits must have seen her get off the stage, and took it as a signal that Mulehoof has a secret gold shipment aboard. It ties together too pat to be written off as a coincidence."

Coventry asked thoughtfully, "And I take it that this girl has bought a ticket for Summit for today's run?"

Kendrick glanced nervously at the clock.

"Yes, she has. Here's the picture, Mel: Two weeks or so ago, Brice notified me he had a hundred pounds of ingots cast and ready for shipment. I got him to hold off until today, so I'd have time to get you here from California.

"Brice keeps the ingots in his private safe at the mill office. Last night at six o'clock, he brought the bars down here, disguised as a crate of machinery parts. Within thirty minutes this woman came in and paid her fare for Summit Springs. She couldn't possibly have known Brice moved the bullion from his office safe, and yet—"

Coventry cut in, "Does this girl work at your mill office, Brice? Does she have access to your records?"

Brice shook his head. "No. I'm the only person who knows when the ingots leave my hands, I can swear to that. And yet, the information is leaking out somehow, somewhere."

Kendrick said quickly, "The leak ain't in my office, Mel—unless you want to suspect me."

Coventry grinned. "Who is this woman?"

"Her name," Kendrick said, "is Denise Blanchard. Perfectly respectable girl, apparently. Bookkeeper at Dexiter's store."

THE ROOM spun around Mel Coventry. Denny acting as an accomplice for the Territory's most elusive gang of highway robbers? It

was unthinkable. It couldn't be.

"Somebody sends Miss Blanchard on these trips," Brice said, "and that's what you're here to find out, Coventry."

Mel's face was an inscrutable mask concealing his torment. By an inexorable vagary of the fates which ruled his stormy destiny, Mel Coventry had been called a thousand miles to put the outlaw brand on the girl he someday aimed to make his wife.

Before he could speak, two burly hostlers came in from the street and picked up the green, iron-bound Wells-Fargo chest waiting beside the door. Lifting it by its iron handles, the hostlers showed by their grunting effort the weight of the chest's contents.

When they had gone outside to stow the box of iron scrap aboard the waiting Concord, Coventry asked heavily, "Have you gents considered that this Blanchard girl might have no guilty knowledge of the part she's playing in these hold-ups?"

"Sure, sure," Kendrick said quickly. "From what I've seen of Miss Blanchard, she's a thoroughbred lady. But she's the hoodoo you'll have riding your wagon today, Mel. One or two of her trips to Summit might just happen to hit a time when Brice was shipping bullion out. But not three times, not four times. And again today, when only the three of us know what the box contains."

Coventry got to his feet, the two men mistaking the haunted look in his eyes for saddle fatigue.

"How about this Dexiter, the hombre who hires the girl?"

Kendrick shrugged. "He had no way of finding out when Brice consigns a gold shipment to us, Mel. Besides, Claude Kendrick's the richest man in these diggings. He's made a fortune. A shrewd, tight-fisted Vermont Yankee trader."

Sam Brice had stepped over to the office window. He turned to face Kendrick and Coventry now, saying in a hoarse whisper, "That's your hoodoo passenger climbin' aboard now."

COVENTRY felt the hard pumping of his heart against his ribs as he rounded the stove to peer through the window past Sam Brice. It was true. Denise Blanchard—the girl who meant more to Coventry than anything else on earth—was even now stepping into the waiting stagecoach outside, the Concord rocking on its bullhide thoroughbraces as she put her weight on the iron footstep.

He had the briefest glimpse of her burnished copper hair under a pert aigrette-feathered hat, and the memory of its softness against his cheek was in him now. A blur of skirts and a shapely ankle, and Denny vanished as a hostler closed the stage door behind her.

The alarm clock on Kendrick's desk buzzed. It was five o'clock, time for the stage to Pioche to be rolling.

"You've got it straight now, son?" Kendrick's voice broke into his thoughts. "After the hold-up, roll down the grade a piece, throw a saddle on the nigh lead horse, and track those masked sons back into the hills..."

Coventry nodded dully. If Denny recognized who was driving her stage —the disloyal thought wormed its way into Coventry's head unbidden and unwanted—would her love for him make her contact the road agents waiting in Summit Springs? If the holdup didn't come off as Kendrick was sure it would—would that fact in itself point a damning finger of guilt at Denny Blanchard?

A sick weight congested his stomach as he shook hands with the two men in the stage office, only half hearing their mumbled good wishes, and headed for the street door.

Stepping outside, Mel Coventry's

face was covered with a bandanna hankerchief as he pretended to be blowing his nose during the time it took him to descend the porch steps and mount the hurricane deck of the waiting coach.

Remembering Kendrick's orders to shuck his gun harness, he unbuckled his shell belt and holstered .45 and stowed them under the straw-stuffed gunnysack which formed the cushion of the driver's seat.

He caught the ribbons from the waiting hostler, kicked off the brake, and swung the six-horse span out into the rutted main drag of the gold camp, putting the Morgans into a jog-trot which left Kendrick's office behind in a boil of rust-colored dust.

He let the team work out its steam on the two miles of level road threading the pit of the gulch, devoting his mind to what he knew of the geography of the fifty-mile run which lay ahead. Another team would be waiting at the Goose Crick relay station, fifteen miles west. Another fifteen miles would bring him to Summit Springs, the mining settlement where Denny would be getting off.

FROM SUMMIT to Pioche, the end of the run, the road dropped three thousand feet in twenty miles. The deadly Pioche Grade. A dizzy series of hairpin curves and zig-zagging switchbacks and cliff-edge roadbed where a man had to keep his foot on the brake beam, and every ounce of energy and mental concentration on keeping his team and stage on the road. Country made to order for outlaw ambuscades...

A wave of soul-sickness mounted inside Mel Coventry as he kept the team at a steady, mile-eating pace. Kendrick thought the actual bandits would be at Summit; he had nothing to worry about this side of the divide.

If the girl riding inside this jouncing coach this morning had made some kind of criminal alliance with the desperadoes who were preying on Mulehoof's bullion shipments—a possibility Coventry steadfastly refused to consider possible—did she have a motive for such a course?

Yes. Knowing Denny, knowing her reason for coming to the Owlhorn gold diggings in the first place, Coventry had to admit that the girl might have a motive for playing a confederate's role with the ambush gang.

They had met, Denny and this Wells-Fargo investigator, more than a year ago in Phoenix. Denny had worked in the office of a lawyer who handled the express company's legal affairs, and it was through her connection with Wells-Fargo that Mel Coventry had come to know her, and quickly fall in love with her.

But Denny Blanchard refused to consider marriage until she had paid off the debts which her father, a saddlemaker, had incurred through his weakness for gambling. Old Sam Blanchard had died a suicide, thinking that self-destruction was the only way out of his mire of bankruptcy. But his daughter had thought differently. The money old Sam had lost over the gaming tables was money borrowed from generous friends. Until Blanchard's debts had been paid to the last penny, Denny would not think of marriage.

"It wouldn't be fair to saddle you with the debts of a man you never even knew, sweetheart," she had told him, on the eve of leaving Phoenix to accept Claude Dexiter's job as a bookkeeper in Nugget Ford, at a salary more than triple what she was making in the Phoenix law office. "When we marry, Mel, there will be no strings attached to your bride."

YES, DENNY'S love for him might make her jump at the chance to make easy money by the simple method of taking an occasional stage-

coach ride to a neighboring gold camp. She might understandably be in ignorance of what she was doing. But surely she must have put two and two together, when a major bullion robbery coincided with every trip she made to Summit Springs.

Stocktenders were waiting with a fresh span of Morgans when Mel Coventry tooled his mud-spattered Concord across the ford at Goose Crick and braked to a halt in front of the log and adobe way-station.

According to his schedule, the stage would make a ten minute stop here at Ike Macrostie's roadhouse, to give the hostlers time to grease the axles, check brake shoes and harness, and afford the company's paying passengers time to stretch themselves and spend a few dollars for beer and sandwiches at Macrostie's place.

Common decency and the tradition of the coaching trade dictated that the driver open the stage door to announce the halt and assist female passengers to alight. But he could not risk having Denise recognize him.

Tossing the reins down to the waiting tenders, Coventry dropped to the ground and, keeping his back to the stage, headed at once into the men's barroom adjoining the public dining room. Denise would not venture in here.

Ordering a beer, Coventry found himself under the curious scrutiny of the apron, whom he assumed to be Macrostie himself.

"New driver, ain't yuh? What happened to Lute?"

"Down with a fever. Filler up again."

"Travelin' empty?"

"One lady aboard."

Macrostie scowled, ladling suds off Coventry's beer mug. "You're supposed to toll yore passengers into my place on these stops, feller. How you expect me to break even on the piddlin' pay the Company gives me for tendin' stock? You ain't playin' fair."

At the end of the ten minutes, Coventry pulled his Stetson brim over his brows and was engrossed in rolling a smoke, thereby covering his face with his hands as he returned to the waiting stage.

He set a boot to wheel hub and was in the act of climbing to the driver's seat, when he discovered that Denise Blanchard was perched up there, at the moment arranging her skirts decorously over her knees.

Coventry kept his head averted as he unwrapped the lines from the jacob's staff and lashed the Morgans into a run from a standing start, causing Denise to sway back on the iron seat back and clutch his arm for support.

"I hope you won't mind my riding up top this way, sir," she laughed, occupied at the moment in adjusting her hat. "It's so stuffy and dusty inside, and the—"

She broke off, and Coventry knew she had had her first look at his profile. He was thankful that the gait of the team had carried them out of earshot of Macrostie's relay crew.

"Mel! Mel Coventry! What on earth..."

He cranked his head around to meet the surprise-rounded eyes of the girl.

"Howdy, Denny. I—I didn't know who my passenger was. How are you?"

SHE LEANED forward, still in the grip of her astonishment at seeing him after so long a time, and he knew she expected a kiss. Instead, he leaned forward to get a pebble out of the cigar box under the dash, hurling it at a lagging swing-spanner.

Denny Blanchard drew back, a notch creasing her brows as she stared at him. "Mel!" her cry lifted above the rap of iron tires on the stony ruts. "What are you doing on this stage? Why, only last night I got a letter from you postmarked

Sacramento City...."

He turned his head, gigging the team around a series of chuckholes in the road, but not before he had seen the hurt puzzlement in her eyes.

Sight of her, with the wind whipping the auburn ringlets away from her ears and flattening her gray bodice against the provocative swell of her bosom, put a harsh ache in the man. He found himself lashing the team unreasonably, thankful that this Ridge Road was only two hours long. At Summit Springs, she would be leaving the stage.

"Mel, what's wrong? Aren't you going to kiss me?"

He kept his eyes straight ahead, his bronzed fists busy with the lines. "Hardly the time or the place, is it, Denny? Toolin' a team isn't exactly in my line."

She leaned back, keeping silent for a considerable run of time. Her shoulder no longer struck his when the coach careened to a sharp bend of the ridge road, she had moved over against the side rails of the seat, her heels perched on the iron rim of the Well-Fargo treasure box.

"Mel, have you lost your job? Aren't you still a detective for the Company? Is that it?"

Knots of muscle contracted the corners of Mel's jaws. Was she fishing for information—information to pass along to unknown men waiting for her arrival in Summit City?

"Yeah," he said in a dead monotone, "I don't tote a star any more, Denny. I botched that California job, and the Company doesn't pay top wages for failures. I'm just a jehu now."

Her arm stole through his. "But—it's not fair, Mel! You were the best trouble-shooter Wells-Fargo had. You know that. Why should they waste you driving a team?"

He risked a quick glance at her, and saw moisture glinting on the long sweep of her lashes. "Makes a difference to you, Denny? Me getting demoted?"

She swallowed hard, and he knew his words had stung her. "Of course not, Mel. I'd love you if—if you had to work swamping out saloons. You know that, don't you?"

THE STAGE team hit a stretch of steep-pitched down grade, and for the time being Coventry had his hands full keeping the Concord from sloughing off the road.

"How's your job at Dexiter's working out?" he spoke again a mile further on.

Her answer came indistinctly above the pound of hooves: "All right, I guess. Mr. Dexiter has given me a raise."

He had to say something, so he temporized with, "What sort of an hombre is this Claude Dexiter? You've never said, in your letters."

The girl laughed, some of her old vivacity returning. "He's past seventy, and grouchy. You remember, Mel, how you winked at me the very first time we met, and I thought you were trying to flirt with me, and I told you I didn't like fresh men?"

"Yeah," he said, the memories crowding him hard.

Unabashed by his brevity, the girl went on: "Well, old Mr. Dexiter did the same thing the first minute we met. But it turned out he wasn't being romantic. He just has a nervous affliction—a tic in his left eyelid. But it was embarrassing, the first time, before I knew—"

Coventry forced himself to ask the question that had been gnawing at him ever since Cy Kendrick had explained his reason for ordering him on this Pioche stage run: "Denny, how come you're going to Summit Springs?"

Glancing at her, he saw that she was staring off at the wheeling ex-

panse of rocks and scrub pinon, as if avoiding his eyes. He wondered, "She must know what I'm driving at."

"Why," Denny said, "Mr. Dexiter has a branch store at Summit. Ever so often, he sends me over to audit the books there. Whenever he thinks the Summit store isn't making enough money. Mr. Dexiter doesn't trust his help—"

Coventry said quickly, "Ever so often? You mean, at a regular date every month?"

She shook her head. "No. Just when the notion strikes Mr. Dexiter." She turned to look at him. "This is a strict secret, Mel, but Mr. Dexiter isn't the rich man folks think he is. He gambles...terribly. Worse than—worse than Daddy used to. Why, he owes thousands to professional card-sharks in Summit and Nugget Ford. I know, because I keep his books. But you mustn't breathe a word of that, Mel, or Mr. Dexiter would lose his credit with the wholesalers."

Denny, babbling conversationally, had no way of knowing the surge of spirit which permeated Mel in this moment.

A TRIUMPHANT phrase was singing in his head: "Dexiter's not rolling in *dinero* like Nugget Ford thinks, then. He might turn to stage robbing to make up his gambling losses."

Yes, a reasoning voice spoke above the throbbing of his pulses, but Claude Dexiter has no way of knowing when Brice takes gold from the Mulehoof office...unless the leak is coming from Brice's office...

At this moment, they were topping the rocky crest of Ten Mile Ridge, an outthrusting knee of the Owlhorn range which gave them their first view of the Summit Springs settlement on the roof of the Owlhorn divide ten miles distant, and the team was moving barely faster than a slow walk.

"Denny," Mel Coventry said huskily, "I reckon this team can handle itself long enough to give you the longest kiss this side of the night we said good-bye in Phoen—"

The shot came without warning, from somewhere in the tumbled lava boulders on the south side of the road. Coventry heard the high-pitched scream of his nigh wheel horse, close on the heels of the rifle's whipcrack of sound; and instinctively he kicked the foot brake to keep the Concord from rolling over the horse as it slumped in the traces.

He heard Denny's cry of terror as the sudden stoppage of the stage slammed her off the seat against the high dashboard. The raw smell of gunpowder was in his nose as he jerked the lines tight, and automatically dallied them around the whipstock between his knees.

A yell came from the high ledge of rock off his left shoulder: "Lift 'em, jehu, or I drill the gal."

Coventry raised his arms, seeing Denny Blanchard recover her balance and come to her knees alongside the Wells-Fargo box. She looked pale, but completely steady-nerved.

Glancing over his shoulder at the Winchester barrel which was thrust over a slab of lava ten feet above the level of the stage top, Coventry saw the hatless head of the ambusher sharp-etched against the skyline. A grain sack with twin slits for eye holes cut in it covered the outlaw's head and shoulders.

Coventry was thinking, they outfoxed Kendrick this time, jumping me this side of Summit instead of on the Pioche Grade. In the following instant, his trained detective's mind told him something else: Whoever had planned this hold-up, assuming Denny's presence on the stage figured in it, must have seen her board the Con-

cord back at Nugget Ford this morning...or at Macrostie's relay station.

"Throw down the box."

The gruff-voiced order was accompanied by a premonitory rasp of the .30-30 lever putting a fresh cartridge into the breech.

Coventry nodded, drawling, "I'm not heeled, feller, so don't let that trigger finger get to itching."

HE STOOPED, whispering to Denny, "Take it easy, honey," and struggled to drag the iron-laden box out of the boot. The effort it took him to hoist the Wells-Fargo chest to his arms, brought an appreciative chuckle from the road agent bellied down on the ledge above. A hundred pounds of gold, at the exchange rate of twenty dollars per troy ounce, would add up to close to twenty-five thousand dollars. The highwayman, so far, had cause to gloat.

The box hit the edge of the road with a heavy jolt, accompanied by a jangle of loose metal which, to the outlaw's ears, would not sound like canvas-wrapped gold ingots. Well, maybe the Nugget Ford office was dispatching specie to Pioche as well as bullion.

As if the crash of the heavy box was a signal, a lone rider spurred out of the mesquite bosque on the opposite side of the road, trailing a horse at hackamore's length. The latter animal carried a hickory-forked pack saddle of the type used by prospectors for transporting heavy loads of ore.

Like the rifle toter, this desperado was masked with a gunny sack, his body disguised with an ankle-length oilskin slicker. The horse he rode, as well as the packhorse, was an ordinary buckskin, without identifying brand. Coventry's acutely-tuned senses could single out no distinguishing feature of saddle gear, bridle or muddy hob-nailed miner's boots to use as future clues.

The rider, carrying a cocked sixgun in one fist and the lead rope with the other, circled the head of the stage team and dismounted alongside the Wells-Fargo box.

In the act of swinging out of stirrups, Denise and Mel Coventry had a brief glimpse of the man's wide-sprung, red-shot eyes through the slits in the burlap bag. An instant before he turned his head, the outlaw's left eye closed in a solemn wink.

Coventry, hearing Denny's scarcely audible gasp beside him, knew she had noticed that twitching eyelid, knew she had jumped to the same conclusion he had. Claude Dexiter had a tic in his left eyelid which made him wink without conscious volition....

Coventry, arms still elevated, whispered under his breath to the girl at his side, "Keep quiet...keep quiet..."

THE OUTLAW beside the stage had a struggle to hoist the heavy chest aboard the packsaddle and lash it securely in position. By the time the job was finished, the masked man's breath was coming in spongy wheezings. A young man wouldn't get winded that easily.

The outlaw kept his head averted from the sight of the couple on the stage boot as he mounted, took up the slack of the hackamore rope and spurred away from the Concord, and was soon lost to sight in the pinons east of the rock formation where his partner still held Coventry under a gun drop.

"All right," growled the rifle toter. "Climb off of there, jehu, and cut that dead hoss out of the traces."

Coventry lowered his arms, thinking of the sixgun hidden under the seat cushion, but knowing that he dared not risk a shoot-out as long as

Denny was exposed to the outlaw's fire.

"OK if this girl gets inside the stage?" Coventry asked, keeping his voice level. "Risky for her if the team spooks when I get it cut loose from that carcass."

He saw the sack-masked head bob affirmatively, and Coventry turned to give Denny his hand, helping her climb down over the front wheel. He knew what the rifle-armed guard was aiming at: To keep the stage driver busy while his confederate got well away from the vicinity with his loot-laden packhorse.

Denny's eyes questioned the trouble-shooter as he let her into the stage, but he gave no hint of the plan that was taking shape in his head. The next ten minutes kept him busy freeing the carcass of the dead wheel horse from the harness, and getting the boogery Morgans backed clear of the obstruction.

The outlaw up on the ledge had come to his feet to keep Coventry in clear view while he worked. Like his partner, this outlaw wore an oil-skin slicker to disguise the details of his other clothing. He kept his Winchester at hip lever, finger thrust through the trigger guard, the muzzle bearing at Mel Coventry at all times.

When the team was ready to travel, the extra wheeler trailing from the rear of the Concord, Coventry looped the lines around his wrist and prepared to climb aboard. He glanced up at the motionless figue of the road agent, as if waiting for instructions.

The outlaw tapped the walnut stock of his .30-30 with a gloved finger. "This carbeen carries a good mile, jehu," the gravelly voice warned him. "I'm a right fair shot. You head for Summit, and don't get curious enough to look back."

Coventry nodded, and started climbing up over the hub and tire, his free right hand reaching for the grab rail of the driver's seat. He had a glimpse of Denny's white face peering at him from the rear seat of the coach; he knew from the dread in her eyes that she expected the guard's rifle to smash him between the shoulders.

IN THE ACT of climbing into the box, Coventry shifted his torso to shield the view of what his right hand was doing from the outlaw on the ledge above and behind him. Apparently getting himself set to swivel to the left and seat himself on the seat, Coventry's right hand reached under the gunnysack cushion and coiled about the curved butt of his .45.

He slid the weapon out of holster and his thumb was earing the knurled hammer to full cock as he pivoted in the act of sitting down, the sun's flash on naked gunmetal hidden from the view of the outlaw standing spread-legged on the lava shelf.

He thought, the first one's got to count, and as he whirled, his right arm came to a quick level pointing.

The masked man's first inkling of danger came when he was in the act of shifting the stock of his Winchester from waist level to shoulder. Surprise at sight of a gun in his target's fist put an instant's paralysis on the outlaw's reflexes, so completely unexpected was the driver's countermove.

It was the clock-tick of time Coventry had counted on to line his sights on the slicker-clad target limned against the shimmering blue sky. He pulled trigger, the shock of the .45's recoil hammering the crotch of his thumb and traveling back through elbow and shoulder.

Dimly through the fount of gunsmoke from his Colt's bore, Coventry saw the outlaw lurch to the point-blank shock of lead hammering his

midriff. The impact of the heavy slug buckled the road agent, causing him to let go his grip on the unfired rifle as he staggered backward.

Coventry was driven to his own knees by the panicked lunge of the four Morgans hitched to his stage. He had a kaleidoscopic glimpse of the outlaw's booted legs up-ending against the sky, and the Winchester clattering down the rocks to the weeds at the edge of the road.

Hauling hard on his fistful of leather ribbons, Coventry kept the team from bolting by pulling them into the rocks, so short that the Concord under him canted over and for a moment was perilously close to capsizing, before it righted itself on the creaking thoroughbraces.

"Stay put, Denny!" Coventry yelled, hitting the ground in a single leap from the driver's seat. He lunged forward, keeping the lines taut, and dallied them swiftly around a juniper snag at the road's edge, knowing the sharp angle of the stage wheels would keep the Morgans anchored.

SMOKING gun palmed, Coventry scrambled lizard-like up the eroded lava formation, believing the owl-hooter was dead, but taking no chances on drawing a shot when he gained the level of the ledge.

Reaching it, he knew from the broken posture of the slicker-clad shape sprawled on the lava shelf that he had made that snapshot count. Blood was guttering through the bullet hole in the yellow oilskin, puddling on the volcanic rock. The outlaw's legs were working feebly, his gloved hands making clawing motions at the sky.

Pausing, Coventry had his look at the upper slope, knowing the horseback with the Wells-Fargo box might be within gunshot range of this scene. But he doubted that; the second outlaw had probably bent his efforts toward putting ground between him and the hold-up scene during the quarter of an hour Coventry had been working to get the stage ready to roll.

Coventry strode forward, dropped to one knee beside the fallen desperado, and with his left hand jerked the gunnysack mask off to reveal the pain-contorted face of a young man with a balding head and frizzly carrot-red whiskers furring his jowls.

He had half expected the face under this mask to be that of Macrostie, the surly bartender at the Goose Creek station.

The bandit's eyes rapidly glazing over to death's swift approach, were perfectly lucid as Coventry reached in his jumper pocket and brought out the ball-pointed silver star which branded him for a Wells-Fargo investigator.

"Listen, hombre," Coventry said, "your sand is running out fast. The Company brought me here to try and pin something on the Blanchard girl down in the stage. A word from you can clear her—"

The outlaw waggled his head from side to side, his throat jerking spasmodically as he struggled to frame words: "Girl...doesn't...know."

This man's time was about up, and there were many things Coventry had to know, It came as no surprise, and therefore no relief, to have his faith in Denny Blanchard's innocence confirmed by this man's testimony.

"The hombre with you—who is he?"

Crimson spume touched the corners of the outlaw's lips as his mouth curled in a bleak grin.

"No dice, Johnny...Law. Don't rat...on my friends..."

Coventry knew this man was beyond threat, beyond bribery. At the finish, he was clinging to the only code of loyalty he knew. "Is it Claude Dexiter? You'll rest easier in hell,

son, if you square your debts..."

The outlaw closed his eyes. His mouth was working, as if he were trying to speak. Through his incoherent gurglings, one word stood out distinctly, yet meaningless: "Scales... scales."

A clattering sound on the rocks behind him made Coventry wheel and jerk up his gun, expecting to see this man's sidekick riding out of the timber. But it was Denny Blanchard, coming up from the road, and she was already too close to be spared the bloody horror of the scene.

"Mel, I had to know you were safe—"

The girl halted, staring down at the outlaw. Glancing around, Coventry saw that the man was dead.

"Know this jigger, Denny—so long as you've seen him?"

She nodded, turning away from the gruesome sight. "Yes. It's Dave Rollins, the clerk at Mr. Brice's office at the mine. He—he lives at the same hotel where I do."

Coventry scowled. "His name isn't Scales?"

"No—it's Dave Rollins." She turned to meet his gaze. "You've guessed that—that the other man was Mr. Dexiter? I'm sure of it, Mel. Those eyes—I'm sure of it."

THE SUN had westered beyond the Owlhorn peaks when Mel Coventry and Denny Blanchard reached the outskirts of Nugget Ford, riding double on the livery stallion which Dave Rollins had left hitched back in the pinons above the stage robbery site on Ten-mile Ridge.

Dismounting at the edge of the road which snaked up the wall of the gulch to the Mulehoof mine workings, Coventry said brusquely, "Wait for me at Sam Brice's office, Denny. If Dexiter is back from his jaunt, I'll dab my loop on him at the store. And you might have Brice send down to the stage stand for Cy Kendrick. I'll want them to hear whatever Dexiter has to say."

He left her then, striding off through the dusk toward the massive loom of Kendrick's store building down-street.

At the door of the Mercantile, Coventry paused long enough to check the cylinder of his Colt. Then he let himself into the gloomy interior of the store, where a lanky individual wearing black sateen sleeve guards and a candy-striped apron was making the rounds of the wall lamps, preparing for the evening rush of trade when the muckers got to town.

"Mister Dexiter?"

The storekeeper turned to face the tall man who was advancing toward him through the store's gloom, a silhouette against the street windows ablaze with sundown's scarlet light.

"Yes sir. What can I do for you?"

At arm's length from Dexiter, Coventry cuffed back the overhanging brim of his Stetson, and he knew from the abrupt change that came over Dexiter's cadaverous face that this man recognized him as the driver of today's stage to Pioche.

"I want you to come up to Brice's office at the mill, Dexiter. I'm a special investigator for Wells-Fargo, looking into this series of bullion robberies."

Dexiter's left eyelid twitched in a ludicrous wink. He fell back a pace as he saw the big sixgun riding the holster at his visitor's flank.

"You—got nothing on me, feller," cawed the trader. "My bein' out of town today—I can prove I was visitin' a minin' claim of mine over on Pronghorn Creek."

Coventry shook his head and, knowing he had a deuce for a hole card, made his bluff. "Sorry, Dexiter, but I tallied Dave Rollins after

you left with that box of scrap iron. Before he cashed in his chips, he did some talking. He—"

The Nugget Ford trader whipped a hand under his canvas apron, and when his scraggy fist came in view it carried a short-nosed .41 derringer.

It was kill or be killed, and that thought steadied Mel Coventry as he made his chain-lightning draw. The blast of his heavy sixgun made the lamps jump to the concussion, and the smoke-ring from Conventry's Colt muzzle made an incongruous halo swimming over Dexiter's bald pate as he fell back against the counter and slowly skidded to the floor, the unfired hideout gun dropping from his limp fingers.

"I might have winged you, Dexiter," Coventry spoke through the gunsmoke, "if you hadn't used Denny Blanchard to tip off your partners in Summit City...."

LATER, IN Sam Brice's office in a wing of the reduction mill, the Wells-Fargo detective faced the nine boss and Denny Blanchard and old Cy Kendrick, telling them what he had learned from Dexiter before the storekeeper had breathed his last.

"This was the first job Dexiter and Rollins pulled by themselves," Coventry explained. "It seems that the gunhawks Dexiter was working with over in Summit—and he gave me their names, which I aim to give to the sheriff over there—failed to divvy up Dexiter's share of the bullion on those other hauls, and with his debts from gambling beginning to get out of hand, the old man decided to cut himself in on today's shipment."

Brice mopped his perspiring forehead with a bandanna.

"But Rollins didn't know about those shipments. He had no way of knowing," the mining superintendent groaned. "I couldn't have been that careless."

Coventry stepped across the room to stand beside the little office safe. A few feet away was a platform scales, its table built flush with the floor, which Sam Brice used to check the weight of ingots from his smelter.

"Rollins tried to tell me his angle—to absolve you of suspicion, Brice—with his last breath," Coventry said. "Watch."

Leaning his weight against the iron safe, Coventry rolled it on its oiled casters across the heavy plank floor until it rested securely on the platform scales.

"All Rollins had to do was weigh your safe every day—an easy enough thing to do, since he worked alone here most of the time," Coventry explained. "And whenever he noticed that the gross weight came up one hundred pounds short, he knew you'd removed that amount of bullion from your vault."

Brice's eyes bulged incredulously. "And then," the mining superintendent whispered, "he'd tell Dexiter, and Dexiter would send Miss Blanchard to Summit to audit the books at his other store—"

"And Dexiter's owlhoot pards would be waiting for our coaches on the Pioche grade," cut in Cy Kendrick. "You see what I mean by Mel's rep as a trouble-shooter, Sam?"

LATER, HEADING through the darkness on their way to the main street, Coventry put his question to Denny Blanchard: "You're out of a job, Denny. How far do you have to go toward clearing your dad's debts—so we can look up a skypilot and buy that little *casa* we were looking at in Phoenix?"

She stepped into the waiting circle of his arms, the starlight showing in her eyes as he looked up at him. "I've

still got eight hundred dollars to go, Mel—"

He laughed. "Wells-Fargo's bounty for cracking this bullion business will make eight hundred look like small change, Denny. The whole case hinged on your telling me about that winking eye of Dexiter's, or I might still be up in the hills trying to track him down."

She burrowed her cheek against the hard angle of his chin. "But Mel—you yourself have never accepted a penny of rewards coming to you. You called it blood money."

"I know. But the eight hundred due your dad's creditors—you could pass that much of Wells-Fargo's bounty along to them without ever touching it. That way—"

The warm pressure of her lips on his told Mel Coventry that his bachelor days were as good as over.

THE END

ARMY OF THE LORD

By Bob Young

REUEL GRIDLEY was perspiring freely as he lugged the fifty-pound sack of flour up the main street of Austin, Nevada, that hot April day in 1864. The flour sack was gaily decorated with small flags, not the stars and bars he followed, and Gridley was accompanied by 36 horsemen, his son Amos, and a municipal band blaring "John Brown's Body".

All of this was sackcloth and ashes to Gridley, a rabid secessionist, but a bet had to be paid, even an election wager. And he had backed the losing candidate in the city's mayoralty race, David E. Buell, a War Democrat.

When Gridley drew up in front of his general merchandise store at the end of the street, the crowd cheered him wildly. Tactfully, the band struck up the lilting strains of "Dixie". Gridley began to feel better.

The men wandered into the nearest tavern to discuss what should be done with the sack of flour. One suggested griddle cakes could be made of it, provided the Democrats got none of them. That was voted down.

Gridley watched them all quietly, then jumped to a table, and began: "You've all had a great joke at my expense, but how many of you are willing now to show your patriotism by using this sack of flour for donations to the Sanitary Commission Fund?"

The men turned to one another to discuss the proposal, as Gridley explained what he planned to do. The Sanitary Commission, formed three years before by order of the Secretary of War, was the forerunner of the Red Cross. The Commission distributed food, clothing and medical supplies to the wounded soldiers from both the North and the South. Gridley proposed to sell the sack of flour at auction, with each bidder owning it until the next bid, and each bid to be deposited into the fund. The crowd began to acclaim their plans, and T. B. Wade took up the position as auctioneer.

"I'll bid $300," Gridley said, starting it off. He stepped up and handed Wade the bid in the hard coin of Nevada. Another bidder upped the price to $500, and then a bid of $1,115 was offered, but Wade turned it down. It wasn't in the hard money they wanted but offered as a certificate of indebtedness, and therefore not quickly negotiable.

MERCHANT bid against mill owner, and miner against gambler. When the hard money was completely gone, a real estate agent proposed to offer bids with Austin city lots—with the understanding that he would redeem all of the pledges the next morning with real money. When the excitement was over, $4,000 clinked in the coffers.

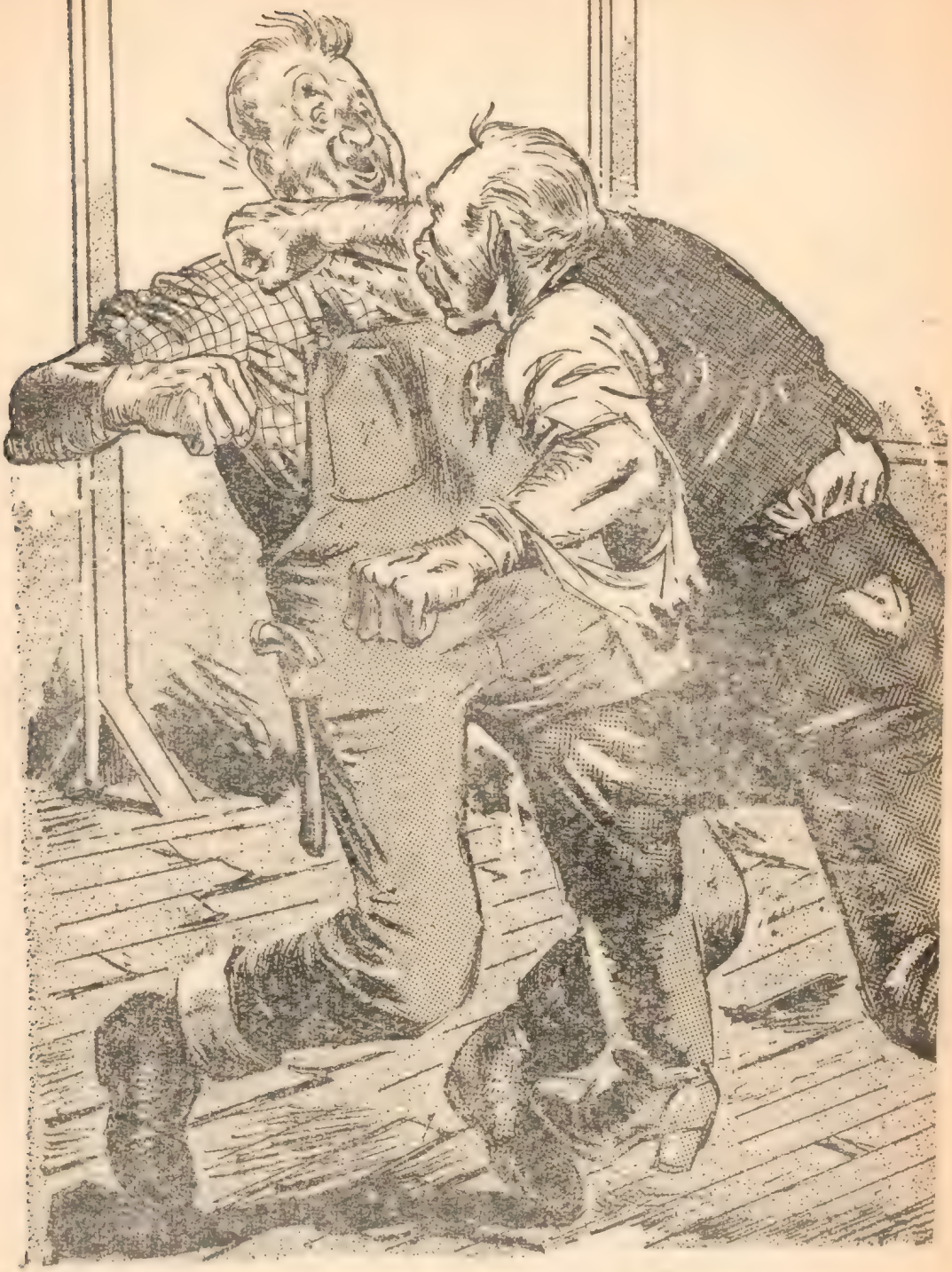
Gridley took up the cause in earnest, and in the next three weeks auctioning at Gold Hill, Dayton, Silver City, Virginia City, San Francisco and Sacramento, he was able to count up $63,000.

It was 1865 before he completed his tour through the West and then the Eastern states, but when Gridley returned to Austin, he waved a sheet recording a total collection of $275,000. In the typical flamboyant manner of the miners, all of the money was melted down into fourteen silver bars, and suitably inscribed with the names of some of the famous battles during the Civil War: Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Chattanooga, Chickamauga, and others.

The famous sack of flour was held by members of the Gridley family for fifty years, after which it was donated by Mrs. Josephine Gridley Wood to the Nevada Historical Society on October 29, 1914.

But what of Reuel Gridley who started the whole thing? During the course of his patriotic enthusiasm in auctioning the sack of flour, he neglected his business, and although he was originally wealthy, died in Stockton, California, November 24, 1870, penniless—ruined by his love of humanity.

MULEBACK'S BOUT



Muleback clenched his fists and got ready to punch—but Crinlon hit him first

WITH THE DEMON

By Lew Talian

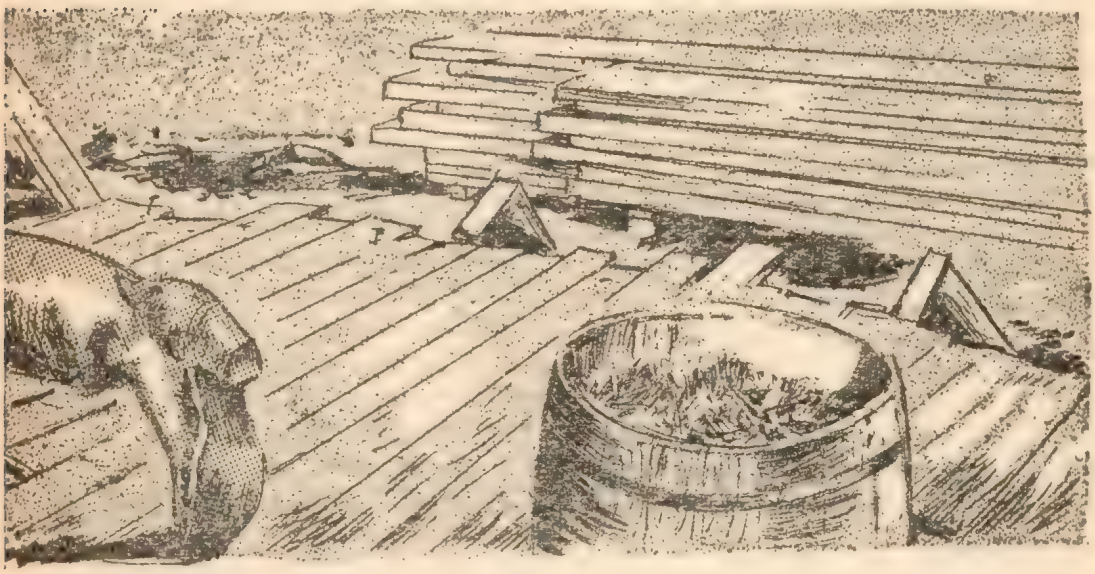
Not until the peaceful Muleback had been accused of murder, did he realize that life's too short to be afraid . . .

MULEBACK KLINT felt the sweat burn down his back. His hands were raw, blood-marked things from the unaccustomed labor. He continued to hammer the planks along the floor of this new building. He needed the money; his little store wasn't making any money for him. He couldn't resist the chance to tell some feller down on his luck to take what he needed and pay when he had it. . .

"I gotta give credit," muttered Muleback. So he strained his unused muscles to the task of finishing the main room of what was to be Phillip Crinlon's NEW DAY saloon.

He straightened out slowly, reached for the hammer—holy smoke! The planking he'd previously laid slid from under his feet. He was frantically trying to repair the inexpert job he'd done, when Crinlon came into the structure.

"What the—" Crinlon's big, whiskered face was ugly with emotion. "You blasted fool, you've ruined the lumber!"



Muleback got to his feet. "It's only a few pieces, I'll—"

"You'll get the devil out of here. You said you could do carpenter's work. You couldn't hit your finger with a hammer."

Muleback's weariness dripped savage energy into his cramped body. "If you're too stingy to hire a real carpenter, why don't you do it yourself?"

"Get out! Go back to your store and feed the no-goods."

Muleback clenched his fists, and his tired muscles twitched. "Only a no-good himself would say a thing like that, Phil."

Phil Crinlon was big and Muleback was big, so when they met, the supporting sides quivered... Muleback found himself on his back, looking up at Crinlon and a couple of loafers.

Crinlon shouted, "Lumber's expensive. Get out, before I throw this place down with you."

Muleback rolled, dodging the foot, got to his feet and headed for Crinlon. He stopped abruptly when he saw the gun in the big man's fist. He was weak as a calf; everything was a crawling mash in his belly. He was afraid of that gun—almighty afraid.

"Don't let me hurt you, Muleback."

One of the loafers laughed, but the tall, burly storekeeper walked past them without a glance.

It was a long walk down the side street toward the end of Main where he had his small store. He didn't pat any of the horses hitched along the dusty street. He didn't wave to Julio the barber or Sitton the undertaker, his neighbors.

His daughter Pelia was behind the short, scrubbed counter. She stared at him. "Papa! What's happened?"

"Nothing."

"You're bleeding. Did you fall from the ladder?"

"I fell from a fist."

The girl was quivering with rage. "Who hit you?"

"Crinlon. I ruined some of his lumber."

"You shouldn't have taken the job. We'll get along alright."

"Sure we will." He opened the door at the back of the store and went into the little office. He sat on the stiff chair and tried to think...think, never fight. Lord, why was he spooked by guns?

HE KNEW, and that knowledge didn't make it any easier for him. His family had been bad. Paw, maw, and his brothers Tic and Red. He'd seen Red gunned down by the lawmen. He'd only been ten, but he'd never forget the screaming pleas of his brother. There, he'd sworn never to wrap a gunbelt around his middle.

Later, he'd found that his body would shake like a skinny tree in a high wind when he held a gun. No, he wasn't a man, and if it weren't for Pelia, he'd drift...drift away from everything. Take a vacation from nowhere.

The door opened and Pelia softly entered. "Papa, Mrs. O'Grandy wants two dollars worth of beans."

He got up. "We stock beans."

"She hasn't the two dollars."

"Tell her to go to Crinlon's store."

Pelia was short, with a gently rounded body. Big brown eyes, big wonderful eyes.

"No," he said. "I'm running a store, not a charity stall."

"All right." The door closed softly behind her.

He stared at his hands. Big hands. Muleback they called him. Strong and contrary as a mule. No, they didn't just call him Mule—it had to be Muleback. Well, he'd show 'em his kick!

But he knew he was only whistling

on his death bed. He yanked the door open, in time to see Mrs. O'Grandy walk down the street.

"Give her the beans, Pel."

Pelia ran after the poorly clothed nester woman. "We have got a half-sack left," she called to the woman.

The woman fairly ran back into the store. Her face was old—but it could smile.

"Thank you, Mister Klint," she said.

"Pel's forgetful," he said. "The beans were just before her eyes."

The woman was given the large quantity of beans, and the ritual of adding two dollars to her large bill was completed.

"You'll get your money, Mister Klint."

"I ain't worrying."

THE GIRL kissed her father. I'll go prepare supper—and two peach pies." She tweeked his nose. "Love you."

He goodnaturedly slapped her frilly skirt. "I'll be on time."

After a few twenty-five cent sales and ten dollars of credit, he decided to close the shop. He was taking a long shot. Sure, he was getting more business than Crinlon's store, but not one-fourth the money. He shrugged. Maybe these people'd get on their feet someday. Then, he'd have the business, not to mention the good will.

Good will. What else could a coward have?

He walked down the board sidewalk, cut across the rubble strewn empty lot behind the Livery, and a few moments later he was stepping onto the small porch of his little house.

The supper was good.

"Papa, I'm going to Florney's house for a while."

"Go ahead. She's a good girl."

His daughter went to change her clothing, and he brought his pipe and rocker to the porch. He sat and smoked. No use getting angry. He just didn't have it. If he tended to his own business, avoided arguments, and gave unlimited credit to everybody who wanted it, he would be left alone and maybe even liked. A hell of a life...

The beating of the drum irked. Who'd be beating a drum this time of night? Then, he saw the kids and women hastening toward Main Street. He lifted himself from the rocker and followed the chattering women.

"He's a doctor," he heard, "selling medicine which makes you young!"

"What'll they think of next?"

Muleback grinned. He'd seen a lot of medicine shows in his time, but never a spieler who promised to dissolve the years with his magical liquids.

There was quite a crowd about the torch-lit rear platform of the brightly colored wagon. A war-painted Indian pounded the huge drum, and the tall, enormously powerful-looking man with the long, black beard held up a small bottle of blackish liquid.

"Here, ladies and gentlemen, I hold in my hand a bottle of medicine which rejuvenates your wife into the loving, beautiful woman she was twenty years ago!"

A laugh flickered through the crowd, a gentle sound. They weren't taking any chances.

The huge banner over the rear of the ornate wagon had the name DOCTOR FELIX CALLIERS woven onto it.

"And," continued Calliers, "I won't waste your time with more words. My world renowned medicine speaks for itself. No, not alone speaks! It shows how you, ladies and gentlemen, can become the persons of your secret dreams!"

Old, crazy Emil, the hermit, who lived in a cave in the hills, yelled to

the crowd: "God shall strike this sinner down." He waved the huge Bible at the crowd. "Go to your homes —live in peace, not in sin."

The crowd shrieked its merriment at the old coot's actions. A couple of the Big Head outfit hustled him away.

"One dollar and fifty cents per bottle," called Doctor Calliers. "Just one hundred and fifty pennies may add a hundred years to your life!"

Bates, the livery man, yelled, "What'll happen if I give my mare a little bit of that stuff?"

"She'll kick your stable apart," Calliers yelled back at him, and the crowd burst into sound.

MULEBACK JOINED the line, wanting to see what the stuff was. He handed over his dollar and a half and received the little bottle.

"Remember, folks," Calliers kept repeating. "Be sure to read the directions before using. Always read the directions."

Muleback put the bottle in his pocket, and when business slacked off, the doctor brought a banjo from a big red trunk and sang a song. He had a loud voice that sounded good with the driving wind to push it over the crowd.

Muleback grimaced when he saw some of the nester people go to the wagon for the life-restoring liquid.

He was filling his pipe when he saw Pelia and Florney. The girls were in the shadows a couple of paces from the doctor. Their faces startled Muleback; he couldn't help but come to the conclusion that Calliers had hypnotized them. Their gazes didn't pull away from the huge figure of the big man.

"Lord," murmured Muleback, going to his daughter.

"Oh...Papa..." She seemed to be returning to a distasteful planet.

"It's late, better come home."

He escorted Florney to her home, and he and Pelia continued homeward in a thoughtful silence.

As he opened the door Pelia broke the silence: "He's beautiful."

Muleback didn't know what to say, so he jammed his pipe into his mouth. "Yeh, he's beautiful."

Muleback could have told the people why his "rejuvenating" medicine worked, but they would have only laughed. On the bottle was a label on which the directions were printed in big letters: TAKE A DRINK OF THIS HEAVENLY LIQUID WHENEVER YOU FEEL THE URGE TO BE A MASTERFUL HUSBAND, COMPANION. GOOD FOR MEN AND WOMEN.

An etching of an impossibly beautiful woman was outlined behind the directions. A person reading the directions couldn't help but linger over this or that part of the anatomy of the woman. It was a major inducement to masterfulness. This, coupled with the people's confidence in the "medicine", gave the users a faith in themselves which was surprising.

Muleback didn't taste the liquid. He had no inclination to be masterful.

Pelia begged off work that morning, so he attended to the store. The few customers who entered the shop gabbed about the doctor.

"He's givin' a lecture at the courthouse," said Sitton, looking as fresh and ready for burial as any of his corpses. "Looks like I won't have much business if this medicine keeps workin'."

At noon, Muleback locked the store and headed homeward. He didn't find his dinner or Pelia. A half-hour later, she tripped in. She looked gloriously happy. "Papa, he's the biggest, most beautiful man I've ever seen." Her young pretty face was a tanned oval of ecstasy. "He asked to take me to the dance Saturday night."

HE NODDED, trying to think of how to tell his lone offspring that "big, beautiful men" were not created for silly little girls as she—but no words came.

"And he smells of French cologne, Papa. He told me it's French cologne."

"Do you know what he sells, Pel?"

"Medicine—to keep people young. He's been persecuted in the big cities. Oh, thank goodness, we're modern enough to accept him."

"Did he say that at the lecture?"

"Something like that."

"He's worse than a robber."

"Papa! Why, he's been in our poor little town for only two days, and you already hate him!"

"You're almost seventeen, Pel, and should be told certain things."

"No, I won't listen. He's so sweet—oh Papa, how could you hate such a beautiful man?" She ran away, leaving him to fry potatoes and burn a piece of venison.

Muleback wasn't a cursing man. He'd had a terrifying boyhood with his renegade family. He reclined in the rocker and dreamed of what Tic or Red would have done in this case. His brother Red would have chopped the big "doc" into convenient little pieces for burial at will.

Muleback groaned. "Pel's done got herself in love with a man who can make sick, dying cats into Queen Cats of Love." Least, that's what he says, thought Muleback, and people believe him.

He picked up the Bible and read it. He had frequently prayed since his wife had presented him with a wet lump of femininity and quietly passed on.

Of late, he'd been whining to Heaven—almost punching Upward—for aid. In his heart, he knew he had to straighten his earthly life, had to show some gumption.

He had devoted his life to giving his daughter everything his brothers and he hadn't had. First: He'd never hit her—no matter what she did. Second: He'd been a good friend to her. Here, he'd succeeded too well. She spoke her thoughts to him as freely as she would to that Florney girl.

He couldn't stand the neat little house any longer, so he went to the store. Pelia avoided his gaze, but talked to him. He realized that she was acting as a woman, and not like his little girl. Now, he'd lost everything.

He fought off the urge to go to the doctor and tear him apart—the doctor wore a gunbelt...

Throughout the afternoon, he suffered with his thoughts. Calliers couldn't be any good, but these traveling men always held a strong attraction for girls.

He left the store and headed for the saloon; he needed a bit of stimulation.

CALLIERS WAS laughing and drinking with the boys at the bar. Calliers started another "humorous" yarn which had to do with a cow, a wire fence and a senseless city yokel. It was very, very muddy.

Some of the boys drifted out as Muleback walked up to the bar. Calliers grinned at him. "If I recall correctly, you purchased the medicine, did you not?"

"I have to see what dumb folk'll buy. I'm a storekeeper."

"Look here—"

"You look: You stay away from my Pelia, understand?"

Calliers face was set and mean. "I never force my attention on any woman," he said loudly, and everybody listened.

"Just remember what I said," snapped Muleback, turning and walking out of the place. He wasn't quick enough; he heard their laughter.

"He couldn't fight a kid," said someone, and Calliers' laughter boiled through Muleback as he headed for home.

The dinner was excellent, but he only forked at the food. Pelia said nothing; her thoughts were enough for her.

HE ENJOYED the darkness as he left the house that night. He walked aimlessly, trying to think; only he knew it wasn't any good. He knew that the best plan was worthless if you didn't have the guts to put it into action.

His feet took him to the skeletal structure which was to be Crinlon's new saloon and gambling palace. He started when he saw the figure duck into the structure. Who'd be sneaking into the place? Not workmen...

Then, he saw the flame, the great spark, and the smoke. The fire was raging in the building. He headed for the area behind the place which wasn't blazing—and then he stopped short.

A shadowy figure with a torch was running around the unfinished room. "There won't be enough gopher-wood to go around," said the figure.

Then, the torch was thrown over a heap of boards and the figure raced for the areaway.

Fear bulleted into Muleback's belly. He had to get away from here. They'd blame him if they caught him near the fire—say he was getting even with Crinlon for firing him from the job and socking him. Already the building was a mass of flames...

He dodged down an alleyway, but it wasn't necessary, people were racing toward the fire, and in the confusion he wasn't noticed.

Pelia hadn't been disturbed by his late entrance, so he tip-toed into his room, removed his boots. He tried not to think of the shadowy person who'd set fire to Crinlon's partially constructed saloon.

He was pulling off his shirt when the fist pounded on the window. He opened the window.

"It's me, Mister Kling—Joe Lowrey. They're gonna come after you; they say you set fire to Crinlon's place *and killed doctor Calliers.*"

"What?"

"Yeh, you gave me a chance when I didn't have no money. Thought I'd warn you, even if you did what they say."

"I didn't kill anybody."

"They say you argued with Calliers about your daughter. They found him in back of the hotel with a knife in his neck, dead. You better pull out!"

He ran to the bed, got into his boots. He jumped to the ground from the window.

"Here, Mister Kling." Lowrey handed him his Colt. "It shoots straight. Good luck."

He shivered as he jammed the gun into his belt. "Take care of my daughter, Lowrey. Tell her I didn't do nothing. Understand?"

"Sure do."

Muleback nodded to the nester whom he'd given limitless credit.

"Take my horse, Klint. Not much."

"Where'll I go?"

"Know the settlement?"

"Yes."

"Well, the patch that's got the barn painted yellow and red is mine. Lucy, my wife, will take care of you."

He leaped into the saddle and kicked his horse away. Fear ripped through his stomach, yet his mind was operating smoothly. How the devil could he pick out a red and yellow barn in the darkness?

As the wind blasted against him and his blood shrilled through his ears, he couldn't help but realize that no court of law would believe him now that he ran away. But it was too late to turn back now.

At least, he didn't have to worry about Calliers leeching after his daughter. He couldn't harbor any grudge against the killer.

HE WAS cold and hungry when he slanted from the thicket, heading for the group of little farms over the ridge. There! In the early morning brightness, he made out the red and yellow barn. He walked to the crudely constructed shack, leading Lowrey's horse.

The door opened, and a ten-year-old lad took the horse and hurried with it toward the stable.

"Come in," said Mrs. Lowrey, "been expecting you all night."

He ate the hot cereal and eggs and drank the coffee. He'd never enjoyed a meal as much as this one. Then, she spoiled it. "Mister Klint, you must take this easy-like. Hate to tell you, but it must be told."

"Go ahead."

"They're holding your daughter for the murder of Doctor Calliers."

"No...no."

"Reckon they are. They say a girl would use a knife."

"But Pel loved him—bad as he was."

"That's what the law says; they say maybe they had a fight."

"They're crazy. I'll go tell 'em."

"That's what they want, Mister Kling. My man came here to tell you, but you didn't come during the night. He's out looking for you now. 'It's a trap' he says, that they want to get their hands on you."

Muleback ran from the house, hurriedly saddled the borrowed mount and kicked away from town. Trap or no trap, they weren't going to give Pel a bad name. He'd die first—and he wasn't the least bit afraid now. Maybe it was because he was sure of his future for the first time in his life...

The street was deserted as he reined up before Sheriff Walland's jail, dismounted and entered the little office.

The sheriff's face whitened as Muleback drew the gun from his belt. "Here, Sheriff, I'm giving myself up."

"That's right smart—" he stopped when he saw the gun pointed at his chest...

"First, Walland, I want to make something clear to you."

"Go ahead." Sweat crept over the man's face.

"I didn't set fire to Crinlon's saloon or kill Calliers. I ran away because a friend warned me of the town's intentions of blaming me. Guess I lost my head; everything was stacked against me. Everybody knew I was mad at Crinlon for socking me—and with Calliers for trying to molest my daughter."

"What do you want, Mule?"

He couldn't control the grin, the 'back' hadn't been added. Even a supposed murderer gets r e s p e c t. "Sheriff, I came back to free Pelia from the guilt you're throwing on her."

"Mule, it was a trick, to get you back. Give me that gun—"

"Not till you hear the name of the murderer."

"For—"

"LISTEN." AND Muleback told him of the mysterious person he'd seen setting fire to Crinlon's building. "The man kept saying 'there won't be enough gopher-wood to go around'." Muleback grinned savagely. "As for Calliers, the same man who burned down the saloon, killed him."

"You got proof, Mule?"

"You can get it."

"That's my job. I like to help you. You're always helping poor folk. Show me your good faith by giving me the gun."

"Oh, plumb forgot." He handed the Colt to the sheriff.

A worried frown slammed across the sheriff's old face. "Son, talk, and talk good."

"Old Emil, the hermit, set fire to the saloon and killed Calliers."

"What?"

"I can prove it—but you must help me."

"Go on."

"Remember when Doctor Calliers talked and sold his medicine the first night he was in town?"

"Yeh."

"Old Emil told the crowd to go home and not buy the stuff—said it was sinful to buy his so-called "rejuvenating medicine".

"I was there."

"Sheriff, you know Emil's almost a saint, the way he lives by himself, away from temptation he says. Well, he set fire to Crinlon's new saloon because drinking and gambling is sinful."

"It makes sense, boy, but how do you know it's him?"

"I saw him when he set fire to the saloon, only I didn't have the nerve to stop him. I didn't know it was him, then. He kept hollering, crazy-like: " 'There won't be enough gopher-wood to go around'. Sheriff I know what he meant."

"What?"

"Gopher-wood was the kind of wood used in the construction of Noah's ark—maybe cypress—but it's called gopher-wood."

"Mule, what in blazes—"

"Only the good ones were saved from the Flood. Right?"

"Yes."

"WELL, OLD Emil meant that all the sinners around here wouldn't escape. He burned the place down, then killed Calliers. He probably told the doctor to get out of town, and he must have laughed or hit the old man. So Emil killed him. Maybe Emil's loco, but he loves God an awful lot. He'd kill to do Him a favor if he thought so—and he did."

"Well, I think I can find out if you're right." The sheriff went to the cell, keyed it open. "Get in till I get back. Don't worry about your daughter, she's with my wife. She's the one who give me the idea to pass the word that I was holding her for murder. She said that would bring you back."

The sheriff went off and Muleback was alone. He counted the minutes. He was lucky, no one entered the jail.

After what seemed an eternity, the sheriff and an excited group of the boys stormed into the jail-house. "Mule," said Walland, "I went to his cave, and told him I wanted to shake his hand for burning the saloon and killing Calliers." The sheriff's face twisted sadly. "The poor old coot said he thanked God that I was saved by his actions. Then, I told him I hadda take him in. He tried to get me with a knife, and I had to shoot him."

"Dead?" asked Muleback.

"Yeh. Didn't want to, but guess it's best this way."

In the excitement, they'd forgotten to open the cell door. The sheriff quickly opened it. Pelia entered the office and rushed to her father. The rannies hastily vacated the office, and the sheriff suddenly had some business to attend to.

"Oh, Papa. I heard all of it. How'd you know it was poor old Emil?"

"Honey, since you were born I had to do some mighty powerful praying. I lead a good life, and once when reading a religious book I came across a place where they said that Noah's ark had been made of gopher-wood. I figured that only a man who read good things would know of it. I remembered Emil, and it came to me all of a sudden—while I was praying for help.

"Oh, Papa..." It was all the girl could say as they walked out of the jail together.

"PAPA!"

"Huh?"

"Your face—it's terrible."

"Was thinking of something. Excuse me."

"Where're you going?" She followed him into his bedroom, watched him open the old trunk, pull out a dusty gunbelt and the old .44.

She cried and pleaded while he checked and loaded the gun. He put the belt around his middle for the first time since his renegade father had willed it to him.

"Pelia," he said gently, "life's too short to be afraid. I got to settle something with Phil Crinlon."

She started to fall, and he deftly caught her, carried her into the bedroom and laid her on the bed. She'd live; he wasn't so sure about himself.

Mac, the bartender, was the only man in Crinlon's saloon. He waved to Muleback and wanted to talk, but Mule only waved back and headed for the office.

He had to be alone with Crinlon. Before a crowd Crinlon might react differently.

Crinlon's eyes were bright as he rose to greet Muleback. He held out his hand. "Sorry I blamed you for the fire—"

"Put your paw away."

"Why—what—?"

"I just come to kill you, Phil. You've been knocking me around plenty."

"Mule?" He too...

"Phil, you know that my family was bad, all gun-men. I didn't take after them 'cause I didn't like to kill." He paused, here came the lie, his life depended on it. "That doesn't mean I can't use guns. Now, I guess I better settle up with you."

"Mule, ah, Klint—"

"Mister Klint to you, bar-man."

"Mister Klint, I was mad. I didn't mean to push you down at the building."

"You sound mighty sincere, Phil."

"Please Mu—Mister Klint." Crinlon was frantic. "I swear I'll never annoy you again. My whole life's been here—"

His ace. "All right. Don't worry, I won't tell anybody of this little confab, Phil. I don't like my personal problems to be talked about in front of people."

"Thank you, Mister Klint."

He laughed. "Just call me Mule, Phil...just call me Mule."

THE END

HOMESTEADER AGAINST CATTLEMAN

THE BITTER fight between farmer and cattleman culminated in many pitched battles. In the beginning, nine times out of ten the simple farmer was beaten and cowed by the sight of bared guns in the hands of cowmen. Cowmen looked on farmers as nothing more than rustlers. Farmers feared and hated cattlemen.

The vast herds of cattle bound for the railheads cut through plowed land, broke down fences and ruined farm property. In 1872, farmers in Butler County, Nebraska took things into their own hands.

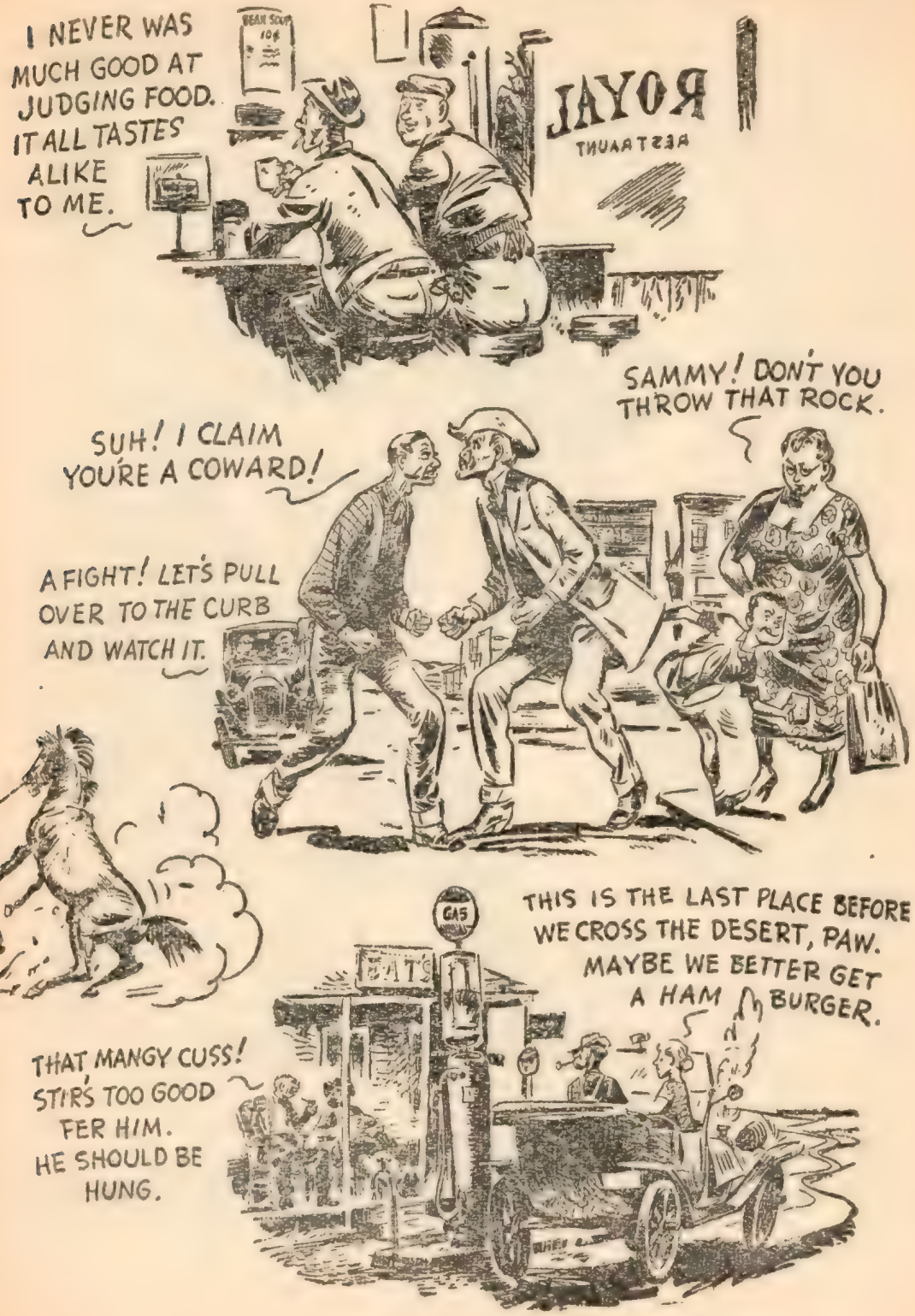
When a terrific storm scattered a herd of thousands of head all over the neighboring farms, and the animals rooted and tore up precious farmland, the farmers decided to do something. A heavy fog followed the storm, and under this cover hundreds of farmers declared open war on the animals. Mercilessly and indiscriminately, they slaughtered the animals. As word got around, more farmers joined the fray. Hundreds of animals were shot down and butchered on the spot, the meat and hides hidden away.

In spite of many attempts at prosecution, cattlemen could get nowhere because the authorities were farmers themselves. The route through Butler County was closed for good. —*John Weston*

EDITOR'S HOLIDAY

THAT'S THE BIG MISSOURI OUT THERE. THEY CALL IT THE BIG MO FOR SHORT.
BY ALLAH'S BEARD! I'M A LONG WAY FROM HOME!
HIC! THIS IS WHAT HE'LL COST YOU.
OKAY, BUT HE'S A LITTLE WILD, AIN'T HE?
FORSOOTH! LET ME HAVE A LOOK NOW!

THIS MONTH, WE'RE coming up with another set of charades which proved so popular with you last time we ran them. You remember how they work. The cartoons contain clues of famous western names, places and events. This time, we changed it just a little; brought it up to date. The answers are not restricted to the Old West. Both *past* and *present* this time. Some of them are a little tough, but that doesn't worry us a bit. As we've often said: "Through these pages pass the most intelligent people in the world." For every one you miss, clip ten points from a perfect score of 100. Turn to page 129 to find out how you've done.


I NEVER WAS MUCH GOOD AT JUDGING FOOD. IT ALL TASTES ALIKE TO ME.
ROYAL
SAMMY! DON'T YOU THROW THAT ROCK.
SUH! I CLAIM YOU'RE A COWARD!
A FIGHT! LET'S PULL OVER TO THE CURB AND WATCH IT.
THIS IS THE LAST PLACE BEFORE WE CROSS THE DESERT, PAW. MAYBE WE BETTER GET A HAM BURGER.
GAS
EATS
THAT MANGY CUSS! STIR'S TOO GOOD FER HIM. HE SHOULD BE HUNG.

The older man put punishing fists to Carey's face, while the girl looked on in horror

JAILBIRD DEPUTY

By W. Lee Herrington

It isn't often that a man gets a second chance in life. Could Rip Carey handle this one right, and still win back Mary?

NINETEEN NIGHTS after Rip Carey escaped from the state penitentiary, he surrendered.

Now, he squatted and put his back to the big rock and shoved hard, his wind-cracked hands turned toward the small punk-wood fire. His frost-bitten ears had picked up the sound—the boot scrape along the rocks above and behind him. Off to his right, his beaten old crowbait foraged among the buck brush and offered no warning nicker. Brush twanged dully against the old nag's tired hocks, and over that rustle came the colder sound of a gun hammer coming back to full-cock.

Carey's rusting double-barreled twelve-gauge leaned against a stunted redhaw, within reach. When his hand moved, it was to pass over the old .44 that had been shot loose by some former owner and now lay in its mildewed leather on a flat rock by the fire. Carey's hand took up the broken stick and punched at the dying fire. It flared and made a grudging outline of light around his gaunt hunkered body, the bony unshaved jawline and the starved hawkishness of his face.

When he dropped the stick and stood erect, he was a tall man, skinny all the way to the bone. He stood as a man who is waiting. His hands dangled loosely, cracked, bleeding knuckles turned inward toward his threadbare levis. Only his eyes kept up the race, probing the dark.

The rest of him had quit. All trails end somewhere, and Rip Carey

prayed fervently that the jail would be warm. His head turned. When he had located the sounds again, he said, "Come on in, Mr. Faxon. I'm not armed and I'm quitting—as of now."

OLD GUS FAXON walked cautiously across the flat rocks. His flinty eyes raked the younger man. Faxon did not lower the 30-30 he held belly high.

"Walk toward me slow-like, and let your hands come up empty." Faxon gestured with the rifle.

Rip Carey smiled then, bitterly, and shuffled forward, his hands held out obediently. "I ran out of shells for the twelve-gauge a ways back," he said hoarsely. "Had one left in the .44 I was saving for the old crowbait. Used it on a jackrabbit for supper. You won't need the irons, Mr. Faxon. I'll keep riding your way without them."

"Mr. Faxon," the older man grunted. "They made you real polite up the river, and taught you some manners."

Young Rip Carey winced as he felt the chopping action of the steel handcuff sliding around his left wrist. Faxon clicked the second cuff, stepped back and lowered the gun. He examined the shotgun and made complaining sounds under his frosty breath. He squinted at the battered .44 and ejected the single empty brass.

"Recollect you never was much for lying," Faxon admitted and whistled sharply. A well-fed bay that Faxon had ridden came down the path and stopped where the rocks tightened. "Pull my saddle bags off," he ordered. "There's salt pork and tea and a few biscuits. And we'll try some of that prairie deer you're trying to boil down."

Carey worked the saddle bags clumsily with his manacled hands. Faxon watched him—this scarecrow of a man, even his wind-reddened neck gaunt and scrawny. Carey was about twenty-three years old, feet encased in broken boots with runover heels. The eyes were the only thing of him that seemed to have eaten lately.

Carey managed the sliced salt pork into the thin frying pan, and set two tin plates against a rock to warm. He stirred the boiling rabbit with the broken stick and tossed salt carelessly into the steaming mass. Faxon circled the fire and sat on the ground, his 30-30 resting against his sturdy knees.

Without preamble, he said, "The Hazelton girl is still waiting for you back in Blue City, son."

IF YOUNG Carey heard, the only sign he gave was a quick tightening of muscles. Then, he busied himself with his cooking chores. He walked around the fire, passing between it and the older man as if testing his alertness.

"That was the wrong thing to say, Mr. Faxon," Carey said finally.

"Why? The truth ain't never wrong."

"This time it is," Carey said doggedly. "One man can't beat the law forever, and I was coming back to Blue City with you because I was whipped. My feet are cold all the way up to my guts, and I had figured she had forgotten about me, after three years."

"Don't know much about women, do you?" Faxon taunted.

"Just enough," Carey snapped with a last show of spirit. He eyed old Gus Faxon, sitting with eyes half-lidded. Carey's foot shot out, his body twisting forward. The 30-30 skidded from Faxon's gnarled hand, clanked across the rocks. Carey's lean body hurtled over Faxon's chunky form, manacled

hands grabbing at the rifle. He fell heavily and grunted with pain. He rolled clumsily, clutching the rifle. Gus Faxon's hand was hovering close to the .45 with the walnut grips as Carey got to his feet awkwardly.

Faxon said, "You shouldn't have done that, son, till you heard what I've got to say."

"I've changed my mind about going back with you," Carey said harshly. "I'm not going back to face jail again—and Mary Hazelton."

"You might as well go back to Blue City," Faxon insisted, "or light a shuck for Hellville. You've made it alone for almost three weeks, but your luck's running out. Only cover you'll find in the whole state of Kansas is on the other side of the Republican, with Boyd Phillips' gang."

"Why not?" Carey asked flatly. A look of defeat shuffled across his hard young face, and disappeared around the corner of his mouth. "I'll be welcomed there. A jailbird."

Faxon nodded. "I've been trailing you for almost three weeks, and you've been going around in circles, trying to make up your mind about crossing the river to tie up with Phillips and his buskwhackers. That's why I started crowding you so close tonight. You'll be taken care of by your kind. Jailbirds."

Carey's mouth hardened. "Get the key out and unlock the cuffs."

A LAUGH rippled along Faxon's mouth. "Well now, son, that's downright careless of me. Never occurred to me I'd need the key, once I had the cuffs on you. Try that right one, though. It's a mite looser than the left one."

Carey tugged at the right cuff. It moved along his wrist, tightened against his thumb. He pulled Faxon's .45 from its leather and laid the rifle aside, reaching for the broken stick. He speared a wedge of salt pork sizzling in the pan. He ignored the heat of the meat, spread its grease along his knuckles. The right cuff came free, dangling.

His eyes danced hotly as he turned.

"The old crowbait out in the brush," he said curtly, "he's about done for. But you might get him to Blue City if you took it slow. I'm taking your rig and—"

"Going to hit for Hellville."

"Sure. I like living as well as the next jailbird. It wasn't my idea to kill Tom Hazelton. I told my story at the trial—how it was him or me."

Gus Faxon toed the fire and it flared, sending highlights across his watery eyes. He said slowly, "I'm going to put my hand in my pocket, son, so be careful with your gun. I haven't got any holdout."

Carey took a half step toward Faxon, then he said lightly, "I never thought you were much of a liar either. Go ahead and make your move."

Faxon brushed back his sheeplined coat, and used a thumb and forefinger to fish into a vest pocket. His hand came away, closing into a fist.

"You remember Jess Morton?" Faxon asked quietly.

"As a drunk, yes," Carey said and nodded. "He was the undertaker in Blue City."

"That's the fellow," Faxon wagged his shaggy head. "Died two months ago. Tried to put the distillery on two shifts. Jess Morton went on a drunk to end all drunks and he caught pneumonia. A couple of nights later, he went on ahead."

"Who buries an undertaker?" Carey asked lightly.

"In this case, Hummert. You recall Doc Hummert."

RIP CAREY'S cracked lips thinned to the thickness of a worn dime. Doc Hummert—Hummert's Drug

Store—the only one in Blue City, or maybe the whole county. It had happened in front of Hummert's Drug Store.

Mary Hazelton had blue eyes. The way a sky is blue when a rain stops and a hot quick sun burns holes in the clouds and scatters them to run on fast to some other wetness.

Boyd Phillips, a big rawboned man, was just coming out of Hummert's. Phillips, who everyone privately said headed a gang of cut-throat, thieving ruffians somewhere on the other side of the river, crossed the narrow street, angling toward the buckboard and the matched grays. Phillips, who everyone spoke to publicly, waved a friendly hand as he walked past.

Catching Rip Carey's eye, his hand flashed in a signal, his thumb making stabbing motions over his shoulder.

Carey jerked his head around quickly. Boyd Phillips said in a low voice. "Hazelton's comin'," and walked on past.

Tom Hazelton strode rapidly along the board walk, crossed over diagonally, keeping his hand close to the .45 holstered low. Rip Carey dropped a hard hand over Mary Hazelton's slender fingers as he said, "We're in for it now."

And Mary Hazelton had pushed her little chin up in the air, holding her back to her father. "It might as well be now as ever, Rip Carey. We fought again this morning when I told him I was going to meet you here—and if you asked me—I was going to say yes, I'll marry you." Her breast rose and fell rapidly. "That is, if you still want me."

Young Carey took his time wrapping the lines around the whipstock. He looked lazily over his shoulder again. Tom Hazelton put a bronzed hand around the rim of the back wheel, the rig sagging as Hazelton vaulted to the high board walk.

Carey said to the girl, "I'll always want you, and I'm asking you again." Their eyes met and held, then Carey's eyes jerked away. Hazelton's hand had fastened to the cloth of the girl's dress, at the neck.

His voice was a thick growl from somewhere in his bull throat: "Get out of that rig! No Hazelton is going to ride around Blue City with Carey trash." His arm stiffened. "Get out, before I pull you out."

Carey's eyes danced dangerously, and his voice was hard and thin: "You'd better do your talking to me, Hazelton."

"All right," Hazelton sneered. "I'm saying it to you now, and to your face. You're trash. Your father was a drunken gun slinger, and your ma was—"

TOM HAZELTON'S big body hurtled against the roof post. A smear of blood oozed warmly from both nostrils. Rip Carey had piled from the buckboard with the suddenness of a coiled rattler striking. Now, he stood over the fallen man, his teeth bared and showing, no longer a kid, lanky of years and bone. He yanked Tom Hazelton to his feet, drove coiled fists against his face, into his stomach and ribs.

Hazelton went down hard, then he slowly and with great care got to one knee. He sucked in welcome air and his big chest heaved. Carey took a step backward, letting the older, heavier man get fairly to his feet. Mary Hazelton watched with impassive blue eyes, staring coldly at her father. Hazelton put his other foot under him and lunged. His bull neck bowed and Carey felt the sharp, crushing pain pounding into his chest as Hazelton's skull slammed against him. He gave ground, felt the square roof post slap against his flat back.

Then, the older man put fists to Carey's face, punishing, ripping blows.

Carey pushed away from the post, Hazelton's fist flattening his lips against his teeth. Carey went down then. Hazelton jumped forward, aiming a kick at Carey's ribs.

The foot landed, carried him on over, spilling him between the buckboard and the porch posts. Hazelton jumped nimbly to the dirt, hands hauling Carey erect. A last single blow smashed against the boy's mouth, and he was being shoved roughly away.

Little clouds of dust billowed as Carey's hands slid along the dry street. Carey barely heard Hazelton, breathing noisily, catching his breath to say: "Now, get to hell out of Blue City."

Rip Carey rolled over, struggled to his feet, staring at the wall of faces around him. The older men, many with daughters the age of Mary Hazelton, eyed him coldly. Offspring of a gunslick—a kid who refused to wear a gun in a man's world. Son of a woman who had sung for a meager living in the best known saloon in Blue City, *Tabor's Place,* until Rip Carey senior had come along. Young Rip was suddenly glad she was resting in the little cemetery at the edge of town.

Tom Hazelton had put his back to the crowd and walked to *Tabor's Place,* ignoring his daughter. Mary linked her arm through Carey's and they limped toward the hitched grays. Carey paused, ran a hand across his bloody mouth, then he lifted the girl into the rig.

He took his time unwrapping the lines and held them tightly against his throbbing chest. He did not look at Tom Hazelton's daughter.

"You can still back out," he said tightly. "Anybody would understand."

Her chin raised again, eyes flashing. "You heard me, Rip Carey. Get going!"

Carey flicked a rein and his teeth snapped shut as the grays heaved against the old harness, heading out of town. When he had pulled close to the gate of the trim, painted frame house, his eyes glinted, dancing recklessly and haunted. His voice was granite hard.

"What little stuff I've got, I can get ready in twenty minutes. Then, I'll come back for you, Mary, and it's somewhere west of the river for us. The farther the better." He clucked to the grays.

BUT YOUNG Rip Carey had not driven the grays back up the main drag of Blue City. He had come out of the little tar-papered shack and stood with his foot on the front wheel hub, tossing his dunnage into the wagon. He stopped, held that way by sight of the two men riding toward him. Boyd Phillips reined in first, hooking a leg over the horn, looking down at the skinny youth.

Phillips raised an eyebrow as he stared at the battered face. "Howdy, Carey," he said cordially, "you know Hank McCanless." He jerked his thumb toward his companion.

Carey nodded stiffly. "Hello, Hank. Unless you boys got some urgent business with me, see me later."

McCanless laughed. "Seems you're the one with the urgent business, youngster. Hazelton is on the prod. Doesn't seem to think he marked you up enough, and as soon as he gets his big belly full of redeye, he's comin' for you."

Carey took his foot from the wheel hub and looked past the tar-papered shack at the dried up fields that had been a truck patch. Vegetables still struggling vainly to root into the yellowing soil. His head came on around, his eyes twin pools.

"That right?" he asked quietly. "That what Hazelton's saying?"

Phillips nodded. "Hank's right, boy. He's up at *Tabor's Place* and he's saying that when you ride out, you better not bother to pick up the girl—just use the south fork and keep drifting."

"Suppose that don't fit my plans." Carey said flatly.

"Well," Phillips pushed back his wide hat and scratched a finger along the mark on his forehead. "In that case, Tom is going to burn you down, boy."

"You boys ride out special," Carey asked, "just to pass the word?"

Hank McCanless reined his dark horse closer and leaned down a bit toward the hard-eyed boy, his voice almost confidential. "We saw the ruckus in town between you and Tom. I 'lowed to Boyd that a kid like you livin' on sprouts wasn't much for a beef eater like Tom Hazelton, and we decided to ride out and let you have the advantage of knowin' what's comin'."

"Thanks," Carey said honestly. He turned his back and walked to the sagging door of the crooked shack. In less than a minute he was back, pushing the strap of the heavy gun belt through the buckle. His flat stomach lacked inches of filling the belt, cinched to the last notch. It swooped close to his knee. Carey hitched it up with his right hand. He did not speak to either of the men as he unhitched the grays and unharnessed. He dropped a halter on the off gray and slid onto its broad back. He brought the horse around, facing Phillips and McCanless, wondering why the two men had really ridden out of their way to warn him of his danger.

Boyd Phillips and Hank McCanless—the two men that everyone said was the right and left hand and gun of the Hellville Gang. Phillips' boys.

"Thanks," Carey said again, and dug his heels in hard.

IT BEGAN to blur in his mind now—the memory of it—the jolting pound as his boots hit the ground; the warm, wet sensation of the gray, blowing close to his ear. Then, he was walking, stalking the remaining hundred yards up Blue City's little street. Carey turned, shoved the gray aside, slapped it on the rump, harshly ordering it out of the probable line of fire.

Rip Carey was not kept waiting. Tom Hazelton's big frame loomed promptly in the doorway of *Tabor's Place*. Doors slammed and windows closed, every man jack hunting a hole. Carey skirted the wide porch of the Post Office with its roof over the sidewalk. His hands were sweaty now, stinging where the dirt had ground into them.

Pride long held somewhere inside him broke out into the open now, and his eyes ceased their haunted dance. His gaze was steady, watching coolly Tom Hazelton's hand.

The older man did not hesitate, even at the long range for a .45 shot. His big gun came out and up and it belched yellowly. Carey sensed the dust kicking up close to his feet, then the slamming blast of sound. Three times Hazelton sent bullets slashing at the ground close to young Carey's feet.

Carey held his pace, walking slowly. Hazelton was in front of Hummert's Drug Store now, and Rip Carey knew a single fleeting minute of fear. Then, it had passed, and his hand was moving, and he understood how the old gun had felt to his father's hand. Without conscious effort, he drew slowly and fired once.

Hazelton let off another shot, and

the twin sounds died as echoes against the flatness of the unpainted buildings.

Up the street, Tom Hazelton crumpled, his body making little clouds in the dust. Men came out openly now, huddling over the body. Carey felt a hand on his arm; the old .45 sliding out of his grip.

Sheriff Gus Faxon was saying in his ear: "That's all, son. Someone pass the word along for Doc Hummert. From here, it looks like a job for Jess Morton, but anyway, hurry it up. Get Doc Hummert."

A COLD WIND soughed up the draw and hurried the little fire into bright flame. Old Gus Faxon said, "When Jess Morton died a while back, Doc Hummert took over. After the funeral, he showed me this." Faxon opened his right hand. "Catch," he said, and tossed Carey a gray lead bullet. "Jess Morton trimmed that slug out of Tom Hazelton before he buried him. When Doc Hummert went through his stuff after the funeral, he found a lot of little envelopes, with names, dates and places written on them. There were bullets inside each envelope. Maybe he was going to write a book about them someday."

Carey squinted at the lead slug.

Faxon went on: "The Hazelton girl has been working in Hummert's place. It was her idea to weigh this little killer in your hand, because it looked a might smaller'n a regular .45. I got your dad's old .45 out of the safe and compared them. This one's a mite scant. Weighs about like a .41, and there ain't many of them around, except Derringers."

Carey tossed the bullet back to the old sheriff. "Probably broke off a piece inside him somewhere."

"No," Faxon said hurriedly. "She's all right there. You never was much of a shot, from what they tell me. Couldn't hit a steer in the rump with a scoop shovel. The way I got the governor thinking is that when you fired and missed, some hombre with a grudge against Tom fired and killed him. You and Tom were the only ones there in the street, because the rest of them ducked inside."

"Wait a minute," Carey interrupted. "I told my story at the trial. How Hank and Phillips rode out to warn me. I shot at Tom Hazelton and killed him because he was gunning at me."

"Where were Hank and Phillips? Sure as hell didn't come to the trial to back you up," Faxon jeered. "No, son, you went to the pen because you was Old Rip Carey's kid—son of a gunslick with smoke in your blood. Tom Hazelton had given you a beating you couldn't take in front of the girl. Twenty men swore on the stand that Hazelton had bet a hundred dollars he could scare you away from his daughter, and make you dance your way out of town with bullets singing around your feet. According to your own testimony, Hazelton was shooting low. He died with a surprised look on his face. You can wipe that out."

"I'm aiming to," Carey scoffed. "I'm crossing the river tonight and joining up with Phillips. I'll drop around come election day and tell the voters you tried hard to bring me in."

Faxon said in a coaxing voice: "You could start over in Blue City. If you was to ride into town in a few days with McCanless and Phillips under your gun, well, I guess there ain't much you couldn't have. I've got a deputy back home that's in with the Phillips bunch and is passing information to him, but I can't prove it. His job would be open, if—"

Carey took three steps toward the

sheriff's fat bay horse. Now, he stopped, his gray eyes dancing with some inner torture.

"With a deputy's wages and your little hoepatch and the Hazelton girl, you could get by mighty nice. The governor sent a man up from Topeka, and this man says the bullet is a .41, not a .45. On the other hand, maybe I'm just stringing you along to fetch you in. You'd have to decide for yourself."

Carey stood for a long minute, his raw knuckles pressed against the torn place in his pants leg. He raised his head quickly.

"How does the Phillips crowd operate?"

"They mostly loot wagon trains and the stage lines, since things got too hot for them over on the Blue side,' Faxon explained quickly. "They've killed a few men, and getting pretty famous, other side of the Republican. I ain't got any idea how you might work it."

Rip Carey squatted by the fire and stirred the boiling stew. He handed Faxon a tin plate. "Eat," he said curtly. "Then I'm drifting."

The old sheriff reached for a warmed-over biscuit and wiped it on his sheeplined coat. "The key to the handcuff," he reminded, "is in Blue City."

HELLVILLE had been named in some forgotten summer when the fiery sun had brazed the wheat and dried the soil to dust. Now, in early March, it lay asleep against the flat lap of countless acres of winter wheat behind it.

Someday—always someday—Hellville would get around to Boyd Phillips and his outfit. No one had much of anything to steal in Hellville, except once a year when harvest was over. A Citizen's Committee was being talked about whenever honest men met, but that's as far as it went.

Phillips had heard the rumors and had laughed, and the summers came and went. Talk. Someday.

Rip Carey's horse sent water splashing against his thin levis as he crossed the ford of the Republican river. He skirted the tiny town of Hellville, his head low, teeth clamped against the cold. Daylight was only inches away from the horizon.

Bridle leather came back stiffly, Carey's nostrils flaring as he smelled wood smoke. He let the bay inch along cautiously into the dark shelter of the cottonwoods. In front of him less than a hundred yards away, three men crouched before a wood fire, all armed with rifles and low hanging gun belts.

Carey pulled farther into the darkness as sounds of horses crossing the river drifted to him. He held one hand to the bay's nostrils, his handcuffed hand cradling the rifle.

The cavalcade left the poor road and held to the almost invisible trail that led to the clearing. The crouched men stood erect. Carey counted five forms silhouetted in front of him. A stooped-shouldered man rode first, obviously the leader. In his shirt sleeves, a bald man rode next, his wrists bound behind him, feet tied under the belly of a giant brown mule. Behind him, a second man, also bound rode easily.

A white hand rose in the semi-gloom. Horses stopped and Carey nudged the bay along, the rifle nosing down, ready. Words came to him distinctly now.

"You've reached the end of your rope, Baldy," the leader said in a rumbling voice. One man laughed. "Or you will in a minute. Any last thing you want to say, or favors you might want?"

The bound man shook his bald head and did not answer.

"McCanless?" The rumble of the leader's voice again. "Hank McCanless? Any word you want to send back to your boss, Boyd Phillips?"

RIP CAREY leaned forward, intent, the cold in his bones forgotten. Someday had come to Hellville. The six men could have no other purpose, Carey knew, than the hanging of Hank McCanless and the other man on the big mule. McCanless, who had passed the word that Tom Hazelton was on the prod—McCanless, who had lit a fast shuck out of town the day of the trial.

McCanless laughed stridently. "To hell with you," he snarled. "Take them damn underwear legs off that you got hidin' your faces. If I'm going to be dropped off to hell, I want to see who's doin' the job."

Carey saw then the covering of the five faces. The leader made no pretense of hiding his stern visage. He was old, bearded and hard-eyed. His hand raised again.

"Chet, wind up two ropes. That old cottonwood is going to see a lot of business from this morning on."

A man stood away from the fire, taking two ropes. Riders dismounted; one climbing across the bareback of the mules, as the bald man was turned, facing the mules' rump. Hank McCanless got similar treatment. A man mounted his saddle. A rider grasped the bridle of McCanless' mount, another stood close to the hackamore of the Missouri mule.

"Take Hank McCanless first," a voice insisted. "He's gettin' anxious."

The bearded leader shrugged. Another hard voice said, "Take 'em both to onc't. The limb'll hold."

His eyes closed as the rope with its nine turns slid up under the bald man's left ear. McCanless sat limp, staring at his horse's rump. Tense hands waited for the signal to stand clear and slap the rumps of the mounts.

First rays of the coming sun brushed through the cold mist and struck against the upraised hand of the bearded man on the black horse.

Sounds of a rifle action slamming home a cartridge to its seat jerked six heads around in unison. Rip Carey sat with one leg over the horn, the rifle along his leg, the handcuff dangling.

"This hangin' is over for a spell, gents, until we get the straight of it. You boys on the nags, turn slow like and toss off the loops. You, Chet, be damned sure you don't spook the jack before the knot is clear."

No man spoke under threat of the .30-.30. Baldy opened his eyes. A faint smile crossed the broad face of Hank McCanless.

Carey snapped: "You, on the black, do the talkin'."

STOOPED SHOULDERS squared. "This pair of coyotes are part of the Phillips crowd. Hank McCanless and Baldy Quindaro. We figure they're part of the crew that held up Meecham's Stage Line last night and rode off with the strong box."

"There was a trial?" Carey scoffed. His voice was icy as the morning air. "You hangin' 'em according to the letter of the law?"

"What law?" The gray haired man sneered eloquently. "We caught 'em down at Second Ford, knocking the strong box open. That's enough for us. We're rememberin' your face too, stranger, from now on."

Carey laughed tauntingly. "You fellers must be new at the game of hangin'. Baldy Quindaro won't weigh more'n a hundred twenty. Man his weight ought to get a nine foot drop, unless you was just figurin' on stranglin' him."

The gray leader said: "I'll remem-

ber that in your case. You're about the same weight. You'll get twelve feet if you want it."

"Heard somewhere," Carey sneered, "that you got to catch a neck before you stretch it. Get off the horse. Then, every son of you line up and sing out. your name. Baldy, grab a rope and snag the whole mess to the cottonwood."

When the six men were bound, Carey rode forward, peering intently at each face as McCanless slid the stocking legs, ragged underwear and makeshift masks from faces. The name each man gave was meaningless to Carey. But he knew it would impress McCanless and Quindaro. It would ease his way into Phillips stronghold. The handcuff, the challenge to the gray leader, all of it would make him acceptable.

Carey wheeled the bay around. "Come on," he ordered, "let's get to hell out of the bottoms."

After a half mile ride along the narrow dirt road, Hank McCanless pulled alongside. "Thanks, youngster," he said. "Maybe I can do as much for you sometime."

"Let's hope not." Carey grinned.

Quindaro pulled the big jack close to Carey's bay and rode for a few seconds in silence; a dark, slender man with night black eyes and dark smooth skin. *"Muchos gracias, amigo,"* he said finally.

Carey waved a hand indifferently. *"Por nada,"* he shrugged.

"No, not for nothing, *amigo,* for my poor neck. To me, it is something. Again, *gracias."*

Hank McCanless interrupted: "Forget about being polite to each other and start ridin'. Those hombres will have friends around to release them. Let's get on up to the office."

THE OFFICE was over the bar. Phillips sat behind a big packing box that he used for a desk. "Well, what happened?"

"We been sittin' up with a sick horse," McCanless said and laughed. His narrow escape from a noose had not left him sobered as it had Quindaro. "What do you think happened? We found a bunch of the Committee on our tail, and the box was too heavy to make time. We stopped off at Second Ford to knock it to pieces. One second they wasn't there, the next they was."

"Who's the—" Boyd Phillips looked closer at Carey.

"You remember him, Phil. The Carey kid from back home. He rode in, stuck a gun on the old man and made 'em turn Baldy and me loose. He's goin' to make us a good man, Phil."

McCanless explained the scene in detail. Phillips stood up, a big rawboned man about forty years old. He took a few steps, clamped a hand on Carey's thin shoulder. "You're made out of the right stuff; got a lot of leather in you. Heard you had give the pen the slip. Baldy," Phillips ordered. "Get a file and get that thing off his wrist."

Carey said lightly, "Let it go for the time being. I'm saving it for a souvenir. It ain't every day you get something from a sheriff—handcuffs, his horse, his grub and his shooting irons."

McCanless joined in the laugh. Phillips jerked his head toward a door and Carey followed. A bed stood in one corner of the small room. Phillips said, "Better grab some rest, because you'll ride with us tonight, if the boys pass on you. We'll talk later." Phillips closed the door behind him.

Carey was grateful for the respite. He had formed no plan of strategy; of how he was going to get Boyd Phillips to cross the Republican, he did not at the moment know.

He laid down on the bed and found it warm. His eyes closed and the warmth of the covers tugged at his senses.

THE SUN was tucked under a gray horizon that hinted of raw weather when Carey woke, his body rested but stiff, his ears alert to the rumple of voices.

Baldy Quindaro opened the bedroom door and came in. He wore a floppy hat now, and his twin dark guns snugged his hips, narrow as a winter starved wolf. He wore a sheeplined vest. "You are awake, *amigo*. *Bueno. Quien mucho duermo poco aprende,*" he said quietly.

Carey grinned stiffly. "Sleep a lot and learn little, huh?" He nodded. "Good advice. What's all the ruckus outside?"

"The men, *amigo*. They vote on you. Some say you stay, some say you go. *Jefe* Phillips says you stay, so you stay. He wants you now to talk much with him." Quindaro motioned toward the door.

Carey got up quickly and dressed hurriedly. He followed Quindaro into the other room. A serious faced Boyd Phillips faced him. "The boys have passed you, Carey. One look at that iron on you and you were in. Now, here's the plan: Things are getting a little hot for us here in Hellville. One of these nights, the Citizen's Committee is going to light their signal fires, and that's when we light a shuck for somewhere else. Blanchard sent word the coast is clear over in Blue City for us to clean out the bank. We'll set fire to the town and ride out."

"Blanchard?" Carey asked.

"Old Sheriff Faxon's deputy," Phillips said promptly. "He's one of our boys. I guess you'll like getting back at Blue City for what they done to you."

"I'd like nothing better," Carey said heartily, "than riding into town again."

"It's settled then." Phillips stood up. Hank McCanless came into the room. He laid the guns Carey had carried on the box in front of Phillips. Phillips said, "Carey rides with us tonight, Hank. This is the last time, for Blue City."

Hank McCanless said gruffly, "Wait a minute, Phil. I want to ask the youngster some questions. When did you break out of the pen, Carey?"

THE TENSENESS of Hank's mouth warned Carey. "Three weeks ago," he admitted. "Why?"

"How you been gettin' by?"

"I swiped a few clothes here and there," Carey said easily. "Borrowed a half dead horse when its owner was asleep. You crowding me, Hank?"

"You came in on a fat bay nag," McCanless insisted. "The .30-.30 is one I've seen in the sheriff's office in Blue City. The .45 has GF branded on the butt grips. The horse has a brand that used to belong to Gus Faxon. You smell bad."

"I don't blame you for figuring that way," Carey cut in. "Faxon heard I had escaped. He took up my trail and he got close to me a couple times. I bushwhacked him finally and took his rigging."

The door opened and a whiskered man came in, spouting words at Phillips. "They're set, Boss. The boys are gettin' nervous."

Boyd Phillips strode to the window, threw up the sash and leaned out. When he turned, his face was a mask of rage and hate. "Get goin' Hank," he ordered. "The Committee has set their fires—one off to the northwest, one down by the river and one on Farley's Bluff. Get word to all the boys that we ride tonight."

"Hold it," Hank said in a surly voice. "So you got the outfit from Faxon? Just handed it over? No fight

or anything?" McCanless laughed harshly. "I think you're a liar, and I'm gonna find out. When did you clean the guns last, Carey?"

Carey knew it was a trap. He had not fired either gun, and he did not know their condition. A wrong answer pegged him for a liar. He said slowly, "I forget just now."

"That's all, Phil," McCanless barked. "The guns are both clean. I think it's a rigged deal. Faxon's squarin' him away for escaping if he acts as a spy in our outfit."

Boyd Phillips hesitated, then agreement dawned in his eyes.

"We can't take any chances from now on, on new hands. Knock him in the head and toss him in the kitchen and set fire to the place. That'll settle the question."

Rip Carey dived toward the weapons on the box. His fingers closed over the .45, finger hunting the trigger. A fist cracked against the back of his neck. His hand went limp and numb. He felt himself dragged by a leg down a short flight of steps. Dimly, he was aware of a sudden smell of coal oil. A foot crashed against his skull. Lights danced behind his eyes and darkness reached out for him.

Outside in the coming night, the bonfires of Hellville burned brightly. The Citizen's Committee had started to assemble.

COLD, ROUGH hands slid along his skin under the thin shirt and tugged Carey back to consciousness. A hand clamped over his mouth, and against his ear a warm voice said, "*Amigo,* you are alive? *Bueno!* Do not make a sound. McCanles' and *El Jefe* they ride out now. I have pulled you from the kitchen where you would roast like a trussed rooster."

Turning his head, Carey felt the blast of hot air against his cheek. The two-story frame building was burning brightly. As he watched, the second story gave way, brightening the sky. Inside the inferno, ammunition cooking off made flat hard sounds.

"*Gracias,*" Carey said heartily, "and this time, I don't mean *por nada.*" He found he could stand. Quindaro pushed Faxon's old .30-.30 toward him, and the ancient gunbelt.

"You will need this in Blue City," Quindaro said. "As for a horse," he shook his bald head, "McCanless shoot the horse with one shot—because she belong to a sheriff."

Carey groaned. "Hell of a fine chance we got of beating Phillips and his crowd, on foot. That is," he added, "if you're tying up with me."

Quindaro said, "There is time, *amigo.* It will take three, four hours for the gang to assemble from the hills. They will need five, six hours to ride to Blue City. We leave now." Quindaro whistled softly. The giant brown mule came close and eyed Carey evilly. "*Amigo,* Big Mo is carry fifty men, skinny like you and me. You save my worthless neck, I save your worthless hide. We are *amigos,*" Quindaro said simply. "Wherever you lead, I follow. Me and Big Mo."

THE WATERS of the Republican chilled like icewater. Baldy Quindaro had wisely counselled that to attempt a crossing below Hellville meant running into the Committee. Some of them would be stationed at Second Ford. Their only chance lay in riding north, swimming the river and gaining an extra hour over Phillips and his men who would ride on up the river, crossing several miles at Northford.

Several times, they had to pull into the shelter of cottonwoods, as they encountered converging small bands of silent, purposeful riders, heading toward Hellville, where the hanging tree waited.

Big Mo took the river as if it had been a cow pond. His big feet dug into the south bank and stomped down the buck brush. By the stars, Carey estimated it was two hours after midnight, and the country was getting familiar.

Daylight was crowding close when Carey slid from the big jack's broad back and watched Quindaro loop the rope under the hackamore and nod that he was ready. They walked stiffly toward the jail building, then pulled back into the shadows. A hard ridden horse was stopping in front of the jail office. Feet clomped across the board walk.

"Blanchard?" The new arrival said hoarsely. Inside the jail office, a figure stirred on the cot by the window. Carey and Quindaro pushed close to the door that hung open.

"Come on, Blanchard, hurry it up," the voice insisted. "Get a shag on. They lit the fires tonight."

"Phillips and the boys get away?"

"They're comin'. I fell in with a bunch of Citizen's riding to a meetin'. From what I gather, this has been building up for weeks. They meet, ride across the river and meet up with Faxon's crowd, northwest of town."

Deputy Blanchard groaned as he struggled into his pants. "That means they'll get the boys in the middle. They won't have a chance."

"They will if you hurry into your pants," The voice urged. We'll—" The speaker's jaw sagged as he turned, spotting Carey and Quindaro in the open door, guns drawn.

Carey said, "You'll lay this fight out in your own jail." In two minutes, Blanchard and the messenger were gagged and laying on the floor of the jail, with two overnight drunks.

CAREY GRABBED an extra gun belt as they trotted through the office of the jail. Quindaro stopped at a window, pointing. Against the horizon, twenty riders were silhouetted, motionless in a last minute appraisal of their objective. Carey walked stiffly toward the street, the .30-.30 crooked in his arm, his right hand close to old Sheriff Faxon's gun. It wasn't often, he knew, that a man got that extra chance. He brushed off the memory of the soft hands of Mary Hazelton, and of the little hoepatch at the far end of Main Street. From the cavern that was the street, a forgotten ghost seemed to creep close, warming Rip Carey's hand. A hot touch of Old Rip Carey, stilling his nerves, loosening the hot quiver in his belly—and Rip Carey knew in that instant that he wanted the hot feel of steel bucking in his hands—hunting Boyd Phillips. He stood, feet planted firmly.

From the board walk, Baldy Quindaro said, "The street, *amigo,* is brave, but foolish like standing behind the heels of Big Mo!" He pointed to the roofed porch of the Post Office. "Up," he yelled. "We stand from the roof. One last big stand. Then we die, no?"

Rip Carey saw the sense of it. Up there on the roof, they could wait until the range was short, deadly. He shinnied up the splintery post behind the bald man. They lay against the wide rough planking that bound the two-by-two balusters into a railing. At the end of the street, Phillips started now. The pace was stepping up, horses running under loose rein.

Blue City slept. Carey leveled the long rifle. A thousand yards. Sound dulled into a rhythm of pounding hooves. Five hundred yards. Hank McCanless rode a little ahead now, sidling off to the right. The mob was spreading, fanwise. Three hundred yards. Carey licked his lips and grinned at Baldy Quindaro. Sound drowned the dull pound of his heart, pushing blood

against his ear drums.

A hundred yards, hooves drumming down the wind. His shoulder jarred as Rip Carey fired. The rider beside McCanless slid off to the right, one foot in the stirrup, his head banging into the hard dirt of the street. Quindaro fired, close to Carey's ear. Carey spit chips of wood from his mouth as .45 slugs poured up from the street. McCanless slowed his mount, switching hands with the gun, blood showing along his forearm. Boyd Phillips had wheeled away from the lead spot, passing under the blind spot of the porch roof. Quindaro squeezed his share of bullets into the milling mob.

CAREY TRIGGERED the .30-.30 until it was empty. Then he yanked his .45 and poured lead into the street. Baldy Quindaro slapped Carey across the hip, his gun pointing. Carey risked a quick look, his heart surging. Sheriff Faxon's men had joined with the Committee from Hellville. They rode fast, and hard, and maybe too late, Carey thought. He reloaded, accounted for three more of Phillips' men. Only nine remained, not counting Phillips, who did not show. Carey swivelled his head, caught sight of Phillips kicking open the door of *Tabor's Place*. Men followed him to the safety of the saloon. More lead poured upward. Carey had only a glimpse of Quindaro, tossing his .45 aside, hand dipping into the sheepline vest, coming out with the deadly little .41 Derringer. Quindaro jumped toward the attic window of the Post Office and disappeared.

Carey looked up the street. Faxon's men were closing now, but still a quarter mile away. Carey dropped to the street, running. His hands were sweating now with eagerness to finish the fight. Hank McCanless, arm dripping blood, pushed away from where he leaned against a hitchrack. His hand came up, his .45 digging dirt as Carey pounded a slug into him. McCanless went down slow, the heavy slug turning him.

The firing lagged. Carey could hear Faxon's men pounding forward now. He vaulted the wide porch of *Tabor's Place*, ducking low. He felt himself plowed aside, hurtling against the door frame. A giant brown body crashed against the door. Baldy Quindaro ducked, rode the big jack straight into the narrow saloon. He slid from its broad back, making chopping motions with his right hand against the big mule's tail.

Big Mo weaved and kicked. His shoulders rose, ripping the hanging lamp from the ceiling. Men scampered before his tearing front feet. A chair hurtled past Carey's head, thrown by flying back heels. Carey went in, skirting the walls; Phillips had just ducked through a newly made hole in the wall between the saloon and the barber shop.

A man screamed, Big Mo's feet pounded, and another man groaned as he was slammed against a wall. A third, caught in a corner crushed by Big Mo's shoulders, screamed wildly. The big jack turned, feet lashing in the opposite direction. Carey heard the bar go over, glass crashing, then he was through the ragged hole, his gun levelling on Boyd Phillips. The chief of the Hellville buskwhackers fired first. Carey ducked, throwing a shot. Phillips dived toward a window. Carey hurtled forward, his arms winding around the bigger man. Phillips pounded at Carey's face with the .45, then dropped it, using his fists.

PHILLIPS HAD forgotten escape. He growled deep in his bull-like throat as his hands punished Rip Carey. Carey hung on. Carey got a solid blow to Phillips' mouth and the big man grunted, loosened his grip on

Carey's neck muscles. Carey swung then, with every ounce in him. His left hand, the handcuff swinging, slashed across Phillips' nose. Phillips sagged, his groan a burble of sound from his mashed face. Carey hit him again and again. He pulled back, exhausted. Phillips crashed heavily, panting.

Then, Carey sucked air into his tortured lungs, and looked over his shoulder. He could hear the hard hooves of the big jack, clomping across the floor, a back door tear loose, and then the animal was gone.

In the street, men lined up in rows on their blowing mounts. Old Gus Faxon alighted, went over to the gray man, and together they stopped in the middle of the street, waiting.

No sound came from Tabor's saloon. Carey hauled Phillips erect, shaking him to consciousness. His words were clipped and hard: "They're waiting for you outside, Phillips, and I guess they want you more'n I do. I only want one thing from you—an answer. Who shot Tom Hazelton, and why was I rigged to take the blame? Start talking."

"You were handy," Phillips mumbled. "Hazelton was feuding with you. Quindaro was posted on top of the Post Office porch roof, to take care of Hazelton if you missed. Baldy made sure.

"Hazelton had joined us and was tipping us anytime the bank shipped through his stage line. He had money in his pocket and thought he was rich and wanted to quit. That's why his daughter turned against him. We wouldn't let him quit, and he was going to sell us out to Faxon."

Carey raised his left wrist, and with his right hand, slid the handcuff over Phillips wrist, jamming it tight. He half pulled, half dragged Phillips toward the street. They stumbled forward and Carey pushed his right hand out, shaking hands with the old sheriff.

"I hope you got that key with you, Mr. Faxon," Carey said heartily. "I'm getting mighty tired of the feel of this thing."

Gus Faxon got out the key. Carey rubbed his wrists. Willing hands hauled at Phillips, loaded him onto a horse. The gray man from Hellville nodded wisely as Faxon took a five-pointed star from his pocket. It had the words "Deputy Sheriff" printed on it. He stuck the pin through Carey's thread-bare shirt and snapped it shut tight.

"Maybe that will help take the sting out of the three years you been away, son. The Hazelton girl has been keeping your shack in order lately, hoping you'd be back. Probably be cooking sowbelly and cakes, 'long about now. I think if you was to hurry..."

Carey turned and walked stiffly down the dirt street. Baldy Quindaro —killer, bushwhacker—had paid off in full. The big mule and Baldy had escaped completely after the fight in Tabor's saloon. Carey walked steadily, seeing the plume of smoke which was rising from the stovepipe of the tar papered shack. His throat was tight and warm.

Mary Hazelton's eyes were blue, and wet. Her arms went under his, fingers digging into his thin back. Carey stroked the softness of her hair, almost whispering words of comfort to her. Her head came up quickly as she felt him tense, ears cocking around, listening.

From behind the rise beyond Blue City, it came—slow, rising against the morning breeze, then gliding into a hoarse guffaw of contempt. Outlined against the buck brush, Big Mo stood, head up, his broad back tight, braying his morning song.

THE END

"KANSAS RAIDERS"

★ ★ ★

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

Jesse James	**Audie Murphy**
William Quantrill	**Brian Donlevy**
Kate	**Marguerite Chapman**
Bill Anderson	**Scott Brady**
Frank James	**Richard Long**
Union Army Captain	**Richard Arlen**
Redleg Leader	**John Kellogg**
Kit Dalton	**Anthony Curtis**
Cole Younger	**James Best**
Jim Younger	**Dewey Martin**
Tate	**David Wolfe**

A Universal-International Picture:	
Produced by	**Ted Richmond**
Directed by	**Ray Enright**
Original story by	**Jack Netteford and Luci Ward**
Release date	**October 1950**

(Title and release date subject to change)

★ ★ ★

THE THUNDEROUS fury of the famed Quantrill's Raiders is vividly brought to the screen in Universal-International's "Kansas Raiders". Producer Ted Richmond and Director Ray Enright have combined their talents to bring to audiences the colorful saga of William Quantrill. Two of the most fascinating characters in the history of their time, Jesse James and William Quantrill are presented in excellent contrast, portrayed by capable veteran of the screen Brian Donlevy as Quantrill, and comparative newcomer Audie Murphy as young Jesse James.

The action takes place during the Civil War, when William Quantrill, leader of a guerilla band in the West, is ravaging Union towns in the name of the Confederacy.

A group of five young riders enter the town of Lawrence, Kansas, and are apprehended by the Union sol-

diers who suspect them of belonging to Quantrill's gang. They are freed by the Union Captain (Richard Arlen), who lets them continue on their way. Their path leads to Quantrill's camp, where the five young men—Jesse James, Frank James (Richard Long), Kit Dalton (Anthony Curtis), Cole Younger (James Best) and Jim Younger (Dewey Martin)—join with Quantrill, despite the warnings of Kate (Marguerite Chapman), Quantrill's beautiful housekeeper. Quantrill is impressed with the little group, especially Jesse, but Bill Anderson (Scott Brady), Quantrill's top lieutenant, takes an immediate dislike to the youngster.

After testing Jesse by pitting him against one of the toughest men in the outfit—Tate (David Wolfe), who is killed in the battle—Quantrill appoints the lad leader of the younger fighters and second in command to Anderson.

When the guerillas on one of their raids, completely demolish a peaceful farm community where unarmed Union soldiers are billeted, Jesse and his brother Frank first realize Quantrill's bloodthirsty methods. The wanton destruction doesn't set well with the James brothers, but the other young guerillas glory in the excitement and lawlessness of the action.

When the group returns to camp, Jesse and Kate experience a growing interest in one another and, again, she warns him to save himself while he can.

After another raid, where he is saved from death by Quantrill, Jesse decides to follow Kate's advice and leave, but when he tries to break with the leader, he is induced to stay by Quantrill's dynamic arguments and his promise that there will be no more unnecessary killings.

When the raiders loot Lawrence, largest objective so far, Jesse takes over when the same slaughter continues.

The action, however, brings down the Union cavalry full force, and to avoid capture, the band splits up. Jesse, Frank, Quantrill and Kate hide out together. Eventually, Quantrill, blinded by gunfire, rushes out of hiding in a suicidal dash to draw pursuer's fire from Jesse and Kate—his death proving his real affection for young James. After running the Union gauntlet, Jesse and Kate part when Kate convinces him that she is too old for him. They ride off in opposite directions, never to meet again.

BRIAN DONLEVY as the dynamic, almost fanatic, William Quantrill plays one of the most colorful roles of his career, with a verve and imagination that will make his characterization memorable. Donlevy combines ruthlessness and courage with a certain protective loyalty to the young Jesse James. His complex portrayal is a finished piece of acting.

Audie Murphy, as young Jesse James, takes on the difficult part of a young man hungry for adventure, yet not bloodthirsty. He combines the conflict of admiration for Quantrill with his dislike of the guerilla leader's murderous methods. Young Murphy plays the outlaw as a young boy in a highly dramatic, realistic fashion.

Glamorous Marguerite Chapman, as Kate, ably takes on a role that tones down the glamour—although she's still plenty sexy—and points up her acting ability. As the girl who loves Jesse James but gives him up, she brings to the screen a sympathetic characterization, in great contrast to the rough and ready portrayals of the men with whom she performs.

Scott Brady as Anderson, Quantrill's next in command, plays a heavy with all the menacing undertones called for in the part. Usually the law-abiding hero in his films, Brady switches

sides to become a really convincing villain in "Kansas Raiders", proving his versatility in any acting chore he must tackle.

An actor to be watched for future stardom is John Kellogg, who plays the role of the Redleg leader in the picture. Kellogg, a discovery of Agent Paul Wilkins who was the power behind Bob Mitchum, is of the same general handsome appearance as John Garfield. In his characterization as a rugged westerner, he presents powerful potential competition for Humphrey Bogart, or early Clark Gable roles.

Irving Glassberg, ace cameraman, has caught all the beauty and majesty of western scenery to enhance the tight plot. Peaceful farm country, vast mountain range backgrounds—captured in color—are as thrilling as the action itself. Colorful period costuming by Bill Thomas, with the varied western garb worn by the raiders, contrasted to the correct military uniforms of the Civil War period, adds authenticity to the film.

An exciting musical background contributes to the drama and swift pacing of "Kansas Raiders", with softer tones for the more emotional scenes balancing the fast tempo and fever-pitch for battle sequences.

* * *

I SAT ON the veranda of a rustic movie-made ranch house and watched the man whom MAMMOTH WESTERN predicted would be a western star, go through his motions in front of the cameras.

The man was Audie Murphy. Next to me sat another actor, John Kellogg, who in our estimation will also be a film luminary sometime soon. Kellogg was explaining the story to me: "Audie is Jesse James in this picture. Watch him. He makes a terrific Jesse James. His movements are so sudden that the director doesn't let him go entirely through with an action until the camera turns."

I wondered what Kellogg meant, but in another minute the explanation was quite clear. Audie faced a screen heavy, David Wolfe. The "Kansas Raiders" script calls for the two of them to have a fight to the death with knives. It had been arranged between Murphy and Director Ray Enright, in order to get stark realism into the action, that one movement would be saved until the final take, and pulled by Audie as a complete surprise to his opponent. It was assumed that the unrehearsed action would be very realistic.

And brother, it was! We saw a bit of judo with which Audie, seemingly with no effort, grabbed Wolfe's wrist and threw the actor over his head, bounced him two or three times on the ground, and walked away. It was all done strictly in G.I. style and it left Wolfe, at least 40 pounds heavier than Murphy, completely dazed without benefit of dramatic technique.

The air around us, even though we were some 25 yards away, was filled with dust. Prop men here and there walked around with pails of water to make the dust settle on the ground so that they could prepare for another scene in a hurry. The grips dusted off the surrounding blackboard-like golden-faced sun reflectors.

These devices are important to outdoor shooting. Without them, the glare of the sun rays in the camera would distort all the vision on the screen. Without the reflectors, too, the sun would have some pretty damaging effects on the faces of the actors. The only actors who really didn't mind the heat were the horses.

AFTER the scene was over, I walked over to Audie.

"Hello, Bernie. It seems like it was only yesterday that you interviewed

me on 'The Kid From Texas' set. Thanks for that write-up. I got a bundle of letters from MAMMOTH WESTERN fans, and I've been answering every one of them.

"Here's a story for you: This golden palomino isn't a star, but he's been in pictures for a long time. About 21 years. He's one of those cast horses that work day in and day out. I rode him during the guerilla fight sequences. He's the finest combination of gentleness, stamina and intelligence I've ever seen in a horse. I understand that he's been ridden by Bob Steele, Jimmy Ellison, Ray Milland, Maria Montez, Gary Cooper, Gregory Peck, William Bendix, Betty Hutton and Tex Wiliams."

I pointed to Marguerite Chapman who was coming toward us, and asked whether she did any horseback riding in the picture.

But Marguerite, teasingly, countered with: "Audie is quite romantic. Wait till you see him on the screen in this one."

"Yes," said Audie. "I kiss her in this picture."

"A kiss? In a Western?" I queried unbelievingly.

"What's wrong with that?" argued Murphy. "Kissing in westerns is okay. I don't care what the custom has been up to now. I figure that a horse opera hero who doesn't kiss the gal is just a plain sucker. That purity stuff in westerns is the bunk. A little honest sex never hurt a man in the wide open spaces, any more than it hurt a man on the city streets. I took my case directly to the boss."

Miss Chapman laughed. "Don't let him fool you," she said. "When it came to the actual kiss, he really was scared. It took a lot of rehearsals to get him to do it right.

BRIAN DONLEVY and Scott Brady were seated in their movie set chairs when I walked up to them to say hello. "Hey," I said to Brady, "I hope that's make-up, because you sure look awful."

"He does, doesn't he?" agreed Brian Donlevy. "He plays one of the lowest, rottenest characters that ever leered past a camera in this one."

Scott Brady told me, "I took up tobacco chewing to make myself look worse. It's the worst tasting stuff in the world, and I've come to love it, because I saw the rushes and I look filthy on that screen with the stuff coming out the corners of my blasphemous mouth."

I'll give you a description of Brady's role in "Kansas Raiders". He's got a beard. He never says a pleasant word in this picture; he kills men for pure excitement; drinks out of an old type mountain jug; sleeps in his clothes and spits tobacco juice all over the stage.

Of himself, he says, "I love it. I'm the worst dastard in western history, and I love it."

I stayed to see the next scene and saw a little man supposedly get shot and fall off a horse, right smack on his head. How he did this and came up smiling intrigued me, so I went over to him to find out the secret.

His name was Bull Zitkin—a grinning little guy who has earned his bread and butter in Hollywood for the past ten years by falling on his head.

"For this," he told me, "I get $175 a fall. For this money, I'll fall on my head as many times as they like. I've fallen off horses in this picture for Audie Murphy, Brian Donlevy and Scott Brady. I never hurt myself. You see, there's a knack of relaxing as you fall, and a double or a stunt man like myself is practiced in the art. Besides, my skull bone is extra thick."

I could not tell whether the little man was laughing at me or not as I walked away.

Abruptly, guns barked from both sides of him, and he fell backward out of the saddle

By Lewis B. Patten

A MAN'S BEGINNINGS

will motivate his actions in later life — as long as he remembers how he started . . .

"STAY AWAY FROM that damned nester trash!" Ike Purdue's voice was harsh, edged with temper. He could see the effect his words had on his son Scott. The young man's eyes were chill and his lean, hard jaw had tightened ominously. But Ike could also see the effort Scott made to control his temper.

Scott said evenly, "The Newmans are good people. What you got against them?" and his eyes told Ike plainly, "I don't like that word you used."

When Ike only snorted, Scott stalked away, his back stiff. Ike watched him go, some of the anger in his eyes now replaced by regret. He thought ruefully, "This is my own damned fault. He's too much like me to handle that way." He muttered

aloud as he turned away, "He's grown, Ike. That's what you keep forgetting."

He'd had his reasons, though. Good ones. There was trouble building up in this country; trouble with the nesters who were crisscrossing the face of the grassland with their fences. And Ike knew how trouble had a way of growing. He didn't want Scott hurt.

Even just seeing them in the distance, the Newmans were a sorry looking outfit, except for Letty, who was trim and neat and pretty enough to fill any man's eye. Out here in this empty land, where there were ten men for every woman—well, Ike guessed he couldn't blame his son. But it wouldn't work. Scott Purdue would some day inherit one of the best ranches in the Colorado Territory. This girl—well, she was only a nester girl, probably no better than she should be.

Ike watched Scott riding out, his eyes hard and straight ahead, and knew that he was heading toward the Newmans' place.

He couldn't help thinking of the bitter resentment the country felt for the Newmans, the first homesteaders to dare crossing to the north side of the river. Ike thought again of how little land they were using; of how any action on his part against the Newmans now would only widen the breach between himself and his son.

He thought, too, of Scott's repeated warnings of late: "This ain't our land, Ike. We hold it by squatters rights and by force, same as everybody else in the country. We ought to file a homestead claim on the home spread and try to buy up whatever else we can. The country's changing, Ike. The nesters have got more right to their land than we have."

He couldn't help remembering the angry question old Miles Babcock had put to him last night in the saloon: "Why in hell don't you put them off, Ike? They're right on your land."

Ike recalled how lame his reply had sounded: "Why, Miles, I reckon I will, soon's I get the time."

He was stalling, and he knew they knew it. He wanted to give Scott time; time for this infatuation to wear itself out. At least, that's all Ike hoped it was. How could he barge down there and clear the Newmans off, knowing how Scott felt about Letty Newman? He'd have to let it ride for a while.

BUT THERE had been something in the tone of Miles Babcock and in the looks of the men siding him, that made Ike wonder if they would be willing to let it ride. Conscious of their lack of legal title to their ranches, they were fighting the influx of homesteaders desperately, trying now to keep them all on the south side of the river. It was a fight for survival, for the cowmen knew from past experience how fast the nesters took over once they had started. Already, the south side of the river was solid with farms to a depth of nearly a mile, and along the length of it from Tejano to the mountains. Some of the ranchers were already doing what Scott had advised Ike to do; homesteading their home spreads and buying what else they could. The others, like Miles Babcock and Eric Peterson, were trying to hold their ranches by force, as they had done since they came to settle here.

Miles was a hothead, and so was Eric Peterson. Guy Stiger sided them last night because... Now he thought of it, Ike could find no logical reason why Guy should mix into the thing. Guy was no cowman; he was a gambler.

Ike had always felt a vast contempt for Guy. But he wasn't fool enough to ignore the man. Guy was dangerous. He would keep piling fuel upon the fires of the cattlemen's resentment until they were crazy enough to do some-

thing. Like maybe burning the Newmans out. Or coming in shooting. Guy wanted Letty. According to Scott, she would have nothing to do with him. And Guy had been heard to brag across the bar: "By God, if I can't have her, nobody else will!"

Maybe Guy's motive was only jealousy, but why in hell would he stir up trouble with Letty's folks if he wanted the girl? Somehow, it didn't make sense. What in the devil could Guy's stake be in this trouble?

Ike got the buckboard team out of the corral and tied the horses beside the blacksmith shop. Then, while the forge was heating, he took hoof nippers to their feet, then smoothed their dainty hooves with a rasp. It was noon before he finished shoeing the team, and he still had that vague feeling of unease and puzzlement in the back of his mind.

HE ATE listlessly in the bunkhouse with the crew, afterward sending them off to pack salt out to the Tejano creek line camp. As he watched Shu Ling, the cook, pick the dishes off the table, he began to feel worried.

Now, he remembered Guy Stiger's scornful words last night, answering his weak plea of not having enough time to put off the nesters: "Why, Ike, we got lots of time. Maybe we ought to give you a hand with that chore tomorrow."

Abruptly, he hoisted his long, bony frame up from the rawhide covered chair and shambled out of the bunkhouse toward the corral, with the briefest kind of glance at the empty, womanless house across the yard. Five minutes later, he thundered out on his rangy black. His old gray eyes were hard, and the drooping mustache that usually made him look so benign, now ony accentuated the determination in his weathered face.

And the cold finger of fear kept tracing its way along his spine. "God," he thought, "I ought to know better. Guy ain't the sort to let a thing lie once he gets an idea." He touched spurs to the horse and felt the power stretching out beneath him. One thing, and one thing only, comforted him. It was still daytime. Such things as Guy had in mind were usually done in the night. Unless... Unless Guy, cold-eyed, thin-faced Guy, figured that a night raid was what Ike and Scott would expect, and tried to outguess them. Scott was there now. He would fight for Letty. That would give Guy the chance he wanted; the chance to kill Scott.

The land flowed past Ike and the loping black. Arroyos, cut by erosion, slowed them. Brush clawed at Ike's skinny legs on which he had forgotten to put chaps. He took the long-unused Colt from its holster at his side and spun the cylinder, placing a cartridge in the empty sixth chamber. And all this while the tension kept building up in him, and the doubt. Suppose he were wrong? What would he do when he arrived at the Newmans'? He shook his head, feeling the ache in the top of it.

He growled, "Damn it, I'll run them off. I can't do nothing else. If I don't, Miles and Guy and Eric sure as hell will. And then somebody'll get hurt. Maybe Scott. Hell, it ain't that they're bothering me. I ain't using that land. It's just..."

It was a hard thing for old Ike to decide, knowing that any action would further alienate him from his son. And this, he tried to forget.

THIS WAS one of those hot, crystal-clear October days. The grass was dry, and crackled faintly under his horse's hooves. He kept dropping down the gradual slope toward the river, and at last saw the squat, squalid-looking

sod hut and the cobbled-up wagon beside it, the tiny wire corral that held the Newman's cow and saddle horse. Two black dots, half a mile away down the river, would be the team.

Ike's lip curled as he saw how little had been done toward clearing the land. He muttered, "Danged lazy trash! Won't work. Ain't got nothing. How do they expect to make a living?"

He could see Scott's roan, tied outside the corral, but beyond that, Ike saw no sign of life. As he came into the yard, he hailed the house, feeling relief, sudden and warm, flooding him. There had been no attack. Guy and the others would have left nothing standing.

A man came out of the door. He was twisted and prematurely old, but tough, like a half-dead pine clinging precariously to a face of rock. His eyes were dull with sickness. Ike said, trying to act pleasant, not really wanting to, "Howdy. You Newman?"

The old man replied, "Yep. Git down mister. Git down an' set."

A woman's pale face peered from behind the man in the doorway, a face too tired, too thin. She stepped out beside Newman and laid a hand on his arm. Looking at her husband, her expression became very soft, very loving.

Stiffly, Ike swung down. He had not spoken, and from the looks the Newmans were giving him, he guessed his face was pretty stern. They could not know how strongly it affected him, seeing that look Mrs. Newman had for her man and remembering how his own wife, dead these twenty-two years, had looked at him in the same sweet way.

It kind of took a man back, remembering things like this that had been too long forgotten. Ike wondered as he stood there how long it had been since he had thought of Nell, as he was now doing.

A faint feeling of shame touched him, thinking how he had condemned Newman for how little had been done. Hell, the man was sick. That was plain. The silence ran on, but Ike never noticed the embarrassed looks the Newmans gave him. He was seeing in these two facing him in front of their pitiful dwelling, something of his own past, something too familiar, and remembering how he had stood on this same land, Nell beside him, loving and tender.

It had been a long time. It had taken twenty-five years to build what he now had, a ranch stretching almost from horizon to horizon, stocked with five thousand fat cattle. But he had started with nothing, just like these folks—except that he had had youth, and health.

Newman said hesitantly, "Did you want suthin'?"

IKE YANKED himself rudely back to the present. He said, "I'm Ike Purdue. You know you're on my... Uh, I'm looking for Scott. I see his horse is here."

Somehow, he couldn't say, "My land," without recalling Scott's words: "The nesters have got more right to their land than we have."

Mrs. Newman smiled nervously, but even this kind of smile made her seem younger. She said, "He an' Letty... Why, they took a walk down along the river." She halted, hesitated, and finally said, "Scott's a fine boy, Mr. Purdue. But I calc'late you know that."

Ike snorted. Little good it'd do them to soft-soap him. This was something he had to do. He thought of Guy Stiger, Miles and the others, and steeled himself.

Newman's knees were trembling and he moved back and sat down on the stoop. He said apologetically, "I been kinda ailin'. Ain't been able to do much, but mebby by spring..." He

sat dejectedly, looking at the ground between his shoes.

Ike cleared his throat and tried again: "This here's my land. The country is against nesters on this side of the river. I reckon you'll have to..." He stopped again as he saw the stricken look on Mrs. Newman's face.

He had faced opposition himself when he had come to this country with Nell years ago. Indians and outlaws. And he had fought almost continually since to hold what he had won. Rustlers. The big blizzard. The fencing wars. The quarreling over water in the dry years. But he'd had youth on his side—and good health. He thought, "I can't be worrying like this about every damned nester that shows up."

Newman got up from the stoop and faced Ike. He spoke bitterly, his eyes meeting Ike's fearlessly, "We don't take much land to live, but it's too much, ain't it? You can't stand to see a man... Hell, what about the gov'mint? They say we kin settle here. You're goin' agin the law to say we cain't." He dropped his eyes from Ike's hard, uncompromising face, suddenly defeated. "Well, we'll go, I reckon. There ain't no law hereabouts 'cept cowman's law. We cain't fight. We ain't young no more."

Mrs. Newman accepted this defeat for her husband without protest, and it did not change the softness that lay in her eyes for him. Ike wondered that her pirde and love could survive so much adversity. They had been through too much together, he guessed, for this to change anything.

He fought against the feeling of shame, the feeling that he had done wrong. He heard a light, happy, girl's voice from the direction of the river and Scott's deep, booming laugh. That, too, stirred Ike's memories. Scott's laugh was so like his own had been. He wondered how he would face Scott now.

A DISTANT whinny cut the air. Ike raised his shaggy old head, alert now as an Indian scout. The deep anger stirred, came boiling through him until his face was hot with it. It showed in his eyes, a wildness welling out of them. He whispered savagely, "Damn Guy and Miles anyhow! So they meant that about coming out here today?"

He turned to Newman and yelled, "All right, stay! But get ready to fight for your right to stay!" reversing his stand out of pure rage. He swung up into the saddle and yelled at Scott as the young man came in sight: "Get that girl to the house! Hurry!"

He drew the plunging black to a stop a couple of hundred yards beyond the house and waited. He knew Stiger would be there in the willows, hidden. His chest began to ache as he waited for the kick of Stiger's bullet to strike it. The time ran on silently, and at last the waiting was intolerable. He yelled, "Guy! Miles! Eric! Get out here and quit skulking in the brush!"

He heard the muffled growl of Miles' voice, "Stiger! Damn you, put that gun up!" and they rode out, the three of them. Behind were six or eight of Miles' punchers.

He heard the sound of hooves behind him and Scott, having taken Letty to the safety of the house and gotten his horse, drew rein ten yards to his right. Scott did not speak, but he was there, and Ike felt warm and good, as if their differences were solved. They weren't, of course. But it made a man feel good to have his son siding him.

Guy growled, "We come to help you get rid of them nesters, Ike."

Ike's eyes blazed. He roared, "What

makes you think I need any help?" and knew instantly that this kind of defiance was just what Stiger had been hoping for.

The man sat on his horse, his body too huge, too powerful for the thin, narrow face above it. The close-set eyes were only slits, but in them was hate, and greed, and killing rage. Ike's brow knit with puzzlement. What in hell was Stiger's stake in this? Ike had the uneasy feeling that if he knew, he could stop Miles and Eric dead in their tracks, make them withdraw their support from the man.

Stiger said, "We didn't come here to palaver, Ike. Stand aside, damn you! We got a job to do, and we'll do it! You stand in our way and we'll gun you down!" His voice had risen to a scream, and now he touched his horse with the spurs.

Ike saw the glittering eyes, the tautness of cheek and lip, the agreement, in the men behind Stiger. Suddenly, he roared, "This is my land! Stay where you're at!" His gun was out of its holster and in his hand with something of the old lightning speed which had kept him alive this last quarter century, and its muzzle centered itself on Stiger's middle.

BUT WHEN he spoke, it was to Miles Babcock, short, powerful, hard of eye. "Miles, something's had me remembering things today. Do you remember Nell?"

A little of the hardness left Miles' face, and he showed his quick surprise at the question. "Why sure, Ike. Reckon I could never forget her."

"I was thinking of her this afternoon," said Ike. "It's been too long since I did. But I got to remembering her, and then I thought of how her and me was fixed when we settled the Slash P. We looked a lot like that outfit there," and he gestured over his shoulder at the sod shanty. He went on, "It's good for a man to remember his beginnings once in a while. What're you using your first house for now, Miles, a chicken house, same as I am?"

Stiger was looking puzzled, but the wildness and anger shone out of his eyes as he seemed to be trying to guess what was in Ike's mind, why he was wasting time sitting here jawing about a lot of things that had happened twenty-five years ago.

But out of Miles' eyes had faded all of the anger, all of the need for haste. He sat there remembering.

Ike said, "Eric, remember the time the Indians came and burned you out and stole your wife? Remember how many days we were on their trail before we caught up with them?"

Stiger rasped, "What're you driving at?"

Ike ignored him. Miles asked, puzzlement showing in his tone, "Yeah, Ike. What are you driving at?"

"This, Miles. I don't reckon we've got any right to run these folks off. They're doing what you and I and Eric did twenty-five years ago. They got no more than we had. And they ain't no more scared, and maybe no less. Folks with guts never hurt a country, Miles. And cattle don't use this bottom land. Ain't enough grass."

He shoved the gun back into its holster as a gesture of good faith. He had not looked at Stiger. He had been watching the faces of Miles and Eric. It had been a long time, all right. Maybe they wouldn't remember. Maybe they wouldn't agree. If they didn't, then there would have to be bloodshed. Ike knew he couldn't back down now.

Scott was a presence beside him. He hadn't spoken, hadn't moved. But Ike knew he would be ready; would be watching, waiting. And he knew Scott would be proud of him. That was a comforting thought for a man to have

if things were to go wrong when the shooting started.

The indecision was still in the eyes of Miles and Eric, but they were wavering. Ike could see it, and he swung his horse, trying by this move to force their acceptance; presenting his broad back to them and to Stiger.

HE HEARD a scream of rage from Stiger. A shot racketed behind him, and at the same instant, something grazed the side of his head, shocking, searing. Fighting the dizziness and surprise, he whirled, grabbing for his gun. He looked down the gaping muzzle of Stiger's gun. He looked at the man's insane fury as he waited for Guy's second shot. He struggled against the weakness, trying to bring up his gun. He had the queer feeling that he was standing on the sidelines just watching all this happening, that it was happening to someone else. His horse danced nervously, but all the time that unwavering muzzle kept following him. Split seconds seemed like hours.

Abruptly, a gun barked off to his right, another at Stiger's right—Miles' gun. The shock of the two bullets, one of them Scott's, knocked Stiger backward and out of his saddle. A bit of paper fluttered from inside his hat as it fell off. He was dead as he hit the ground.

Ike shoved his gun back into its holster. He put a hand dazedly to the side of his head, and it came away sticky and wet. Scott asked, "Ike, you all right?" and Ike nodded, staring stupidly at the body of Stiger, as were the others.

Finally, Miles slid out of his saddle and picked up the paper that had fallen from Stiger's hat. "Why, that dirty...! Look at this!"

He handed the paper to Scott. Scott grunted, "Homestead claim. Southwest quarter of Section 25." Ike could see Scott growing angry, could see the telltale signs in the darkening eyes, the paling face.

Scott said, "Ike, you know what this claim covers? Our home ranch. I was getting ready to file on it, so I know the description."

Ike thought he was beginning to see through the muddle. He murmured, "He filed on our place, but he knew he couldn't prove up on it until he got rid of us. And he had to make it look legal, or at least like an accident. This was the way he figured to do it. All that talk in the saloon last night was to get me and Scott over here today. He figured he'd kill me, and Miles or one of the others would gun Scott down when he opened up on them."

Miles asked, "But could a man file on a place another man was holding?"

"Reckon he could. Those land office fellows down in Tejano don't know who's on every piece of land. Bet I could file on your place, Miles, if I had a mind to."

Miles looked over toward the homesteader's shack. He said, "Thanks, Ike. Reckon you kept us from doing something we'd have been sorry for." Then, "Boys, load Stiger up and lash him down. Take him in to the sheriff in Tejano."

Scott tore the homestead application across and watched it flutter to the ground. "I'll get in and file for us tomorrow, Ike. Times are changing, and a man has got to go along with the change."

He and Ike rode slowly back together toward the Newmans' sod shack. Letty's form was bright beside its drabness. Ike guessed it would be pleasant to have a woman around again. He didn't speak, and neither did Scott, but both could feel the thing that was between them—a solid, comforting, lasting thing that nothing could destroy.

THE END

The appearance of the man startled her momentarily. But he obviously thought her a boy...

QUEEN of the WILD RIVER

By Frank P. Castle

Abigail was handling a man's job. But the question in her mind was: could she handle a man?

ABIGAIL FOSTER scrubbed vigorously with a bar of carefully hoarded soap. Her slim shoulders gleamed wetly above the murky Colorado River water swirling in the high-sided wooden tub which she had placed on the texas deck under an awning providing a patch of shade, and her short, butternut-colored hair was plastered tightly against her head.

The river-boat *Nonpareil*—an incongruous name for such a little, rickety craft—rocked gently to the surge of the savage Colorado, and Abigail found the motion soothing.

This was her first bath in the five anxious, nerve-racking days it had taken her to pilot the *Nonpareil* to Yuma City from Puerto Ysabel, where the Colorado poured into the Gulf of California. The deep silence, which told her she was alone on the boat, was reassuring.

Perhaps she napped a little. Abigail didn't know. She had been confident that she would know instantly if anybody stepped aboard, and that she would have plenty of time to get into her cabin. But when the sound of a footstep came to her, the man who made it was already at the top of the ladder, a dozen feet from her. He must have come aboard and up the two decks to the texas as quietly as a cat.

"Hello, sonny," he said casually. "You the only one on the boat?"

Abigail had tried to hunch lower in the tub. She couldn't, and realized it was silly; unless he came closer, all he could see was her head and possibly her shoulders.

The suddenness of his appearance had momentarily rendered her breathless and started her heart to thumping like a kettledrum. Now, she relaxed a little. He obviously thought her a boy. This made her somewhat indignant, though she had no intention of setting him right.

It was true she was handling a man's job, but Abigail didn't think this made her look like one. Unseemly as it might be, she felt she'd rather have him ogle her instead of clipping a cigar, as she nodded jerkily in answer to his question.

"I thought so," he said, puffing smoke. "Well, I'll wait around. Want to book a cabin for upriver. I'm Dick Kimberly. You mind if I share your shade?"

"You—you'd better go down and make your pick now," Abigail said, forcing her voice as deep as possible. "There's a lot of travel going north—"

"So I've heard," he smiled, coming a step closer. "You don't shove off until tomorrow morning, though. There's no hurry."

"But there is!" she protested desperately, as he took another step. "Go down right now!"

HE STUDIED her, a slim, broad-shouldered man who had thick brown hair showing under his shoved-back hat, whose boots gleamed with a high polish, and who wore immaculate linen and new broadcloth. He also wore a Navy Colt, holstered low. And he was about the handsomest man Abigail had ever seen.

"Never encountered such concern on a boat before," he said. "All right, I'll go pick a cabin. But I won't stay in it! This is the only cool spot on your craft. I'll be right back."

He went down the ladder, a slanting stairway with worn oak handrails, as silently as he had come up it. The moment he was out of sight, Abigail leaped from the tub, a flashing white streak in the hot sunlight, and raced into her cabin. Not until the door was slammed and the bolt shot, did she relax even a little.

Then her anger—sharpened by piloting on the wild Colorado—came explosively, and she said some hot words directed at this Dick Kimberly who could walk like a cat. She wasn't half-scrubbed, and her cabin was an airless oven.

Maybe it had been foolish of her to risk a bath on deck, but she hadn't thought so. The few passengers from Puerto Ysabel had gone ashore, and the freight had been unloaded. Her father—brisk, bustling little Cap'n Ben Foster—was in Yuma City booking freight and passengers for the trip upriver. The Cocopah Indians of the deck crew had hurried off to their village.

The boat was moored on the starboard side to the bank, and she had hauled the tub around to the port side; she hadn't felt like wrestling it on into her hot cabin and then hauling water to it—a function usually performed by the steward. If anybody at all could see her, it would have to be a soldier with a spyglass at Fort Yuma, across the river in California.

But Dick Kimberly had seen her, even if he had mistaken her for a boy. He had come aboard silently, and he had spoiled her bath.

Abigail blotted her yellow hair with a towel and slashed a comb through it. Then, she hesitated a moment before opening her little locker and bringing out some things she had bought at Puerto Ysabel and never worn—a rustling red petticoat, a wide skirt richly embroidered, and a chino blouse.

She put these on, frowning at herself in a tiny, cracked mirror, even though they semed to make her right pretty. As pilot of the *Nonparcil,* she always dressed the part so no man could get any mistaken notions. To appear now bare-legged in a low-cut blouse, in this country of few women...

Still, she had to provide such a contrast to what he thought he had seen in the tub, that he wouldn't have any second thoughts about it. Abigail went on deck again, finding the swish of skirts against her legs pleasant.

BUT DICK KIMBERLY did not rejoin her. The heat increased. She paced the deck and stared across the river at California, goal of a westward-pouring tide of people which seemed to have no limit. It looked very uninviting—just a sun-blasted desolation of sand and rock and brush.

Abigail fumed inwardly, telling herself to stop being silly—to put on the blue cotton jeans and the old white shirt that she habitually wore.

Then, she was suddenly rigid. She had felt instantly the slight change in the balance of the little boat. Somebody else was coming aboard. Or—perhaps—Dick Kimberly was going ashore. Abigail hurried around the pilothouse to the starboard side.

Leaning over the rail, she looked down. From here, she could see the cabin deck immediately below her, and part of the cargo deck below that.

A man was coming along the gangplank to join another who was waiting for him. From here, they looked to be the same breed—the lawless, whiskered kind which made Yuma a town of many evil deadfalls. Both of them carried guns.

They conferred together a moment, and passed from sight under the cargo deck overhang. Then, Abigail saw Dick Kimberly again.

He was moving forward on the cabin deck, and she thought a shadow would have made more sound. His right hand gripped the Navy Colt. He passed under her and paused at the ladder leading down to the freight deck. Now, he started to run forward on tiptoe, making a little more noise, but not much.

It was obvious to Abigail that he was going around to the port side. She ran through the pilothouse just in time to see the first of those two men who had come aboard, reach the head of the port ladder on the cabin deck. He had an exultant grin on his bearded face as he sighted Kimberly, and swung up his gun.

"Look out, Dick!" Abigail yelled.

The newcomer's head jerked back as he stared up at her. Kimberly leaped across the deck, and his jolting fist knocked the fellow flat. But the downed man grabbed Kimberly about the knees as he fell, spilling him, also. Locked together, they rolled across the deck.

The second man was coming up the ladder, tilting his gun at Abigail. She ducked back. A sounding lead which her father had brought up here, planning to fit a new line to it, caught her eye. She lifted the heavy weight to the texas rail.

That second fellow, below, was trying for a shot at Kimberly's back. Abigail cradled the lead against her breast for a moment, and then let the missile drop.

It hit the second man a glancing blow against his shoulder. He yelled in mingled pain and alarm, staggered sideways off-balance, and pitched over the cabin deck rail into the river.

WHEN HE reappeared, the racing river had already carried him past the *Nonpareil's* paddlewheel. Abigail watched anxiously, and didn't breathe easy until she saw him hit a sandbar nearly a half mile south and scramble up out of the water.

When her glance swung down to the cabin deck again, Dick Kimberly was on his feet. His Navy Colt centered steadily on the man who had jumped him.

"Get up," he ordered. "And climb over that rail—"

"No!" the other protested. "I—I don't swim so good, and the Colorado's in flood."

"Your friend hit a sandbar; you can, too, if you try," Kimberly snapped. "I'm handing you more of

a chance than you did me. What kind of a deal was made? Weren't you promised enough gold for a high time in the Yuma bars if you pumped me full of lead?"

The fellow licked his lips fearfully, staring at the racing brown current.

"Never mind answering," Kimberly went on, earing back the hammer of his gun. "Just carry the word that the next try will have to be made another way—and by somebody else. I'll remember you and your friend, no matter where we might happen to meet again. Get over the side!"

Abigail gripped the texas rail tightly with both hands. It was justice, she thought—rough, but merited. Frontier law would approve if Kimberly emptied his gun into this man who had obviously tried to kill him.

Nevertheless, she didn't like seeing anyone deliberately forced into this wicked river. Few men went into the Colorado at any season and came out alive. Now, in spring flood, it had a remorseless brutality greater than a herd of stampeding buffalo.

This was Kimberly's business, and she didn't say anything; but she felt vast relief when his glance suddenly flicked up at her and his gun turned aside.

"Get on ashore," he ordered gruffly. "But remember what I said. Stay out of my way!"

The fellow bolted, moving so fast that he tripped and fell when halfway down the ladder. He scrambled up, and his footsteps sounded loudly as he ran across the cargo deck and on ashore.

THEN, KIMBERLY was looking up again, grinning as he holstered his gun. "Thanks!" he said. "You lent your help at just the right time."

Abigail stepped back. Now, she felt shy and stiff—a feeling that increased as he came up the ladder to the texas, looking at her in a way which made her acutely conscious of how low the chino blouse was cut.

Kimberly's gaze shifted to the wooden tub, and his brows lifted. "Who was the lad taking the bath?" he asked.

"My—my brother."

"Brother..." Kimberly murmured, an odd light dancing in his eyes.

"What were those two after?" Abigail said hurriedly.

He shrugged. "Who knows? They probably saw me come aboard, knew the boat was deserted, and acted on the hunch that I'd have some cash on me."

He wasn't telling the truth, Abigail thought. Maybe it made up for her fib. He was coming dangerously close to her. She stepped back, and bumped into the tub.

"Passengers aren't allowed on the texas," she told him hastily.

"I know," he said, smiling. "And I'll get below in a minute. First, though, I've got to tell you something—and do something—"

"What?"

"I'll tell you that you're prettiest—as well as the quickest-witted—girl I've seen in three mortal years on the desert."

"And—and what are you going to do?"

"Express my thanks," he said, his smile widening, "for your help...."

He put his hands lightly on her shoulders and kissed her.

THE *NONPAREIL* clawed its way slowly upriver, its paddlewheel thrashing the water at top speed, dense clouds of smoke pouring from its twin stacks. Abigail gripped the wheel's spokes tightly in the pilothouse, feeling the tremendous power of the river, knowing that only a split second of weakness or inattention

might mean the little boat would be spun around and capsized.

Her father came in, removing his cap and mopping his bald forehead with a bandanna. "Biggest load we've ever carried, daughter," he reported.

"So I noticed," Abigail's voice was short. "You've got the boat packed solid to the guards. Is the whole country heading for Yuma City to ride the Colorado north in a hunt for fortune?"

"Looks like it," he said. "A lot of our passengers are hoping for a short cut from Fort Mojave or Hardyville to the California gold fields. But a lot more are farmers, bound for the Mormon settlements in Nevada. I—I agreed to run all the way to Callville, this trip...."

Abigail felt herself go tight inside. She had been to Callville, far north in Nevada where the Mormons were trying to reclaim the desert, just once. She didn't like to remember it. Every trip upriver was bad, and it got more nightmarish with each mile north.

"I know you don't like running all the way to Callville," Cap'n Ben hurried on. "But it means a lot to us. There are a lot of those farmers, and they're paying well. Just about one more trip such as this, and we'll be in the clear. We can go east and buy a nice sidewheeler on some quiet river. You can stay home and live like a lady, and marry well—"

This was what Abigail had hoped and lived for. But now, she wasn't so sure she wanted it. There was something about this vast country which had got into her blood. Every day was a new challenge. She felt a queer wrench at her heart as she thought of leaving the Colorado.

"Why is it we're getting so much trade?" she asked. "Where's the *Western Star?*"

Cap'n Ben licked his lips nervously. "I've put off telling you, honey. The *Western Star* beached and burned at Spaniard's Slough, ten days ago."

Abigail's grip on the wheel tightened convulsively. The *Western Star* had been the only other steamboat on the Colorado, since the *Argonaut* had beached and burned in Boulder Canyon last year. Now, the *Nonpareil* was alone on the river.

"Something queer about it, too," her father hurried on. "The passengers who got back to Yuma City claim an Army officer got shot, and that the pilot wasn't at the wheel when she struck. There was talk of river pirates—"

"That kind of talk is always made when a boat's lost," Abigail said. "No pirates would be interested in the plows and farm wagons we haul. The river is mean and tricky, both sides of Spaniard's Slough; that's what wrecked the *Western Star*. Dad, go below and make sure those Cocopahs in the bow are keeping a sharp watch for snags."

He nodded obediently and left. Abigail's concentration increased as she studied the river. Every ripple in the churning water ahead meant something; she had to read that meaning instantly, and never make a mistake.

IT WAS a heavy weight for a girl of twenty to carry—to know she was the only person now who could take a steamboat up to Callville and back to Puerto Ysabel.

She could do this, and had done it now for more than a year, because it was necessary. The long, torturous trail to the California gold fields had ended for her and Cap'n Ben in Yuma City. Her father's strength had given out; he couldn't go on.

They had taken a chance on the *Nonpareil,* stranded high on a sand-

bar and abandoned. At the beginning of last year's spring flood, they had floated it.

Somehow, they had managed to keep the little boat afloat. But this had been managed because Abigail had learned the river. Cap'n Ben, experienced in piloting on the quiet trickles that were rivers in the east, hadn't been able to cope with the Colorado.

Abigail suddenly grabbed at the bell rope and sounded a wheezy note of warning. The Cocopahs in the bow tensed. A sizable tree, uprooted hundreds of miles to the north, was plunging with terrific speed toward the *Nonpareil*. It was visible as a twisting, writhing shadow, barely visible under the water.

The wheel spun as Abigail threw her weight against it, turning away from that shadow. One of the Cocopahs leaned far out, balancing a long pole. He put its end against the tree and shoved. It shot past the boat, only feet away. Abigail wiped one damp hand and then the other on her shirt.

"That was something to watch!" Dick Kimberly exclaimed from behind her. "Do you have to do it often?"

"Dozens of times every day," Abigail answered automatically. Then, she shot a quick, angry look at him. "You were told before to stay off the texas!"

He smiled, coming through the open door to stand beside her. "I know. You'll probably put me ashore if I don't obey the rules, too. But I had to see you, Abigail. I had to find out why you're avoiding me."

Abigail sniffed. So he had learned her name. And now, he had the gall to come up here and plague her. "Get back below," she snapped. "Go lean on the cabin deck rail and make pretty talk to that black-haired hussy with her bare shoulders—" The wheel spun violently as she turned the boat toward midriver to avoid a sandbar.

"So that's it!" Kimberly chuckled. "But you do Mrs. Lansing an injustice, Abigail. Her shoulders last night weren't any more bare than yours yesterday in that chino blouse."

Abigail snorted angrily. If there was one thing she could do without on this particular voyage, she thought, it was to have aboard as passenger the beautiful and provocative woman who called herself Mrs. Eugenia Lansing.

SHE HAD felt apprehension at first sight of her, just before sunset yesterday, when the passengers for the upriver trip had started to come aboard at Yuma City.

Mrs. Lansing had been escorted by Cap'n Ben himself, cap in hand. A couple of men, apparently her servants, had been bent double by the weight of a big chest which apparently contained her luggage. And in a couple of minutes, she was in the best cabin on the ship—the one already picked by Dick Kimberly. He had bowed and scraped and yielded it to her.

Later, at supper in the crowded little room Cap'n Ben liked to call the *Nonpareil's* dining salon, lamplight had made rich ivory of Mrs. Lansing's bare shoulders, and had turned her hair to shimmering ebony; it had seemed to accentuate the tightness with which her black velvet dress, shot through with silver, clung to her full figure.

Dick Kimberly, sitting beside her, had been downright flirtatious, ignoring Abigail as though they had never met. Abigail had been so upset that she had tried to stir some interest in a hard-bitten Army officer whose name was carried on the passenger register as Major John Hardwick—and who, Cap'n Ben had heard, had arrived in Yuma City only that afternoon from Santa Fe.

But Major Hardwick's attention had been centered on Mrs. Lansing, also. Drat the woman, anyway! Every man in the dining salon had been ogling her.

Later, Dick and Mrs. Lansing had strolled on deck together in the flooding light of a full desert moon, and Abigail stamped back and forth on the texas, telling herself in bitter whispers what a fool she had been to feel there had been any meaning in his kiss.

She hadn't been able to forget that kiss for a moment. The tingling excitement of it lingered with her. Possibly, that was because no man had ever kissed her before. Now, fighting the wheel while he stood at her elbow, her anger boiled as she remembered all the thoughts she had devoted to him, wondering who he was and why those two river-front ruffians had tried to kill him at Yuma City.

"You were right pretty in that blouse," Kimberly said softly. "I'm sorry you're not wearing it today."

ONE OF THE Cocopahs down in the bow yelled an urgent warning pointing ahead. Abigail nodded; she had already seen the snag of tangled debris which could rip the bottom out of the *Nonpareil*. She rang for half speed and let the boat lose headway for a moment, swinging it back toward the opposite bank.

"Save your pretty compliments for Mrs. Lansing," she suggested tartly. "Let her tell you, the way she has told everybody else, how smart she is to join that wagon train making up at Fort Mojave for the California gold fields, and how rich she's going to be once she gets there."

"I can't talk to her now," Kimberly said. "Like nearly everybody else aboard, she is keeping to her cabin through the day's heat."

Abigail sniffed again. "This isn't heat! Wait until she's had a week of the desert; there's no cabin to hide in when you're with a wagon train!"

"You know something?" Kimberly chuckled. "I think you're jealous of Eugenia Lansing, Abigail!"

She was so startled that for a moment her grip on the wheel relaxed, and the boat began to turn before the river's never-ceasing pressure. All of the Cocopahs yelled, as water came aboard, and she hastily straightened it out again.

"Jealous? Drat you, get out of here and stay out!" Abigail cried.

"I guess I'd better, at that," he agreed, to her surprise. "It may not be very smart for me to be up here now. But I had to see you—and, not knowing what may happen, or when, I didn't think it safe to wait—"

"All right; you've seen me. Now, get below!"

Abigail heard him laugh softly, coming closer.

"If I had known yesterday that you were such a hot-headed little spitfire—" he began.

"I'm not!" she denied furiously.

"—I'd have kissed you just the same—and more than once," Kimberly said, a roughness in his voice that made her heart leap. "Abigail, listen to me. Maybe you'll have a smooth, uneventful trip to Callville. But I don't think so. Be on your guard every minute, day and night—"

Abigail was puzzled, and a little frightened. She had never felt quite this way before, still angry with him and yet with a tingling awareness of Kimberly's nearness which sharpened all of her senses to a razor-sharp pitch, something exquisite and yet almost unbearable.

"I'm always on my guard," she snapped, tossing her head. "Especially against soft-talking men who make mysteries of themselves. Will you get below?"

He put his hand on her arm, and his touch seemed to rob her instantly of all defense. Kimberly leaned toward her. "Please don't be angry with me, Abigail," he said earnestly. "I don't like being a mystery, either. But it's necessary. And I'll tell you everything...soon..."

He was going to kiss her again, she knew. And she just didn't seem to have the power to concentrate on the river and shove him away...

Then, a gun roared and a bullet smashed glass on the starboard side of the pilothouse—a bullet which was such a near miss that Abigail felt the stir of air as it flashed between herself and Dick Kimberly.

ABIGAIL bit her lip angrily, pulling the wheel hard over in a blur of flying spokes. The boat narrowly missed a sandbar. Kimberly had raced out of the pilothouse, Navy Colt in hand. In a moment, she thought, he would be back, with more mysterious talk of something bad about to happen. This time, she meant to cut him off before he could get well started.

She had a boat to pilot to Callville, as far north as any craft could go on the Colorado. And if Dick Kimberly didn't leave her alone, she was going to pile it up right here at the beginning of the trip!

Down on the bow, one of the Cocopahs had looked back, but nobody else displayed any interest. Not even Cap'n Ben, who was closely watching the river. Gunshots were not uncommon sounds aboard the *Nonpareil.* Passengers often whiled away the long hot days by firing at targets.

Kimberly came back, pushing a small, sharp-faced man who wore a dirty white jacket. "You know this fellow, Abigail?" he demanded.

"Of course," she replied. "He's Harry Wolverton, our steward. I suppose you haven't seen him before this. He's been sleeping off the effects of last night in the Yuma City deadfalls."

"Miss Abigail, I just got up an hour ago," Wolverton said, mouth twitching nervously. "I was starting to tidy up your cabin when this man busted in and herded me here—why, I don't know. I haven't done anything—"

"Of course you haven't!" Abigail said. "Go back and finish your work, Harry. And be sure you're in shape to supervise the boys when they serve supper tonight."

Wolverton nodded deferentially, shaking off Kimberly's hand and hurrying out.

Dick Kimberly clipped a cigar, studying Abigail's profile thoughtfully. She was acutely aware of this, but her back was stiff and her chin set; her moment of confusion and weakness had passed, and she didn't intend that it should return.

Piloting the Colorado was a difficult, dangerous job. She had endangered the boat by allowing this man to distract her. It wasn't going to happen again.

"He fired that shot, Abigail," Kimberly told her quietly.

"Oh, for heaven's sake—! That was only somebody on the deck below, aiming at a hawk."

HE SHOOK HIS HEAD. "Look at that broken window. The shot was fired from this deck. And Wolverton was the only one up here."

"Did he have a gun when you grabbed him?"

"No. He must have thrown it in the river when he saw that he had missed me—"

"Why on earth," Abigail demanded, "would he try to shoot you?"

"I don't know," Kimberly said slowly.

"You can't say that, like those two yesterday, he thought from your looks you might have some money, and was trying to kill you for it."

"No," he admitted. "Abigail, I'm sorry I couldn't tell you the truth about those two—"

"Then tell me now!" she exclaimed, whistling a warning of another uprooted tree racing toward the boat.

"You tell me about Wolverton. How long has he been with you?"

"Only about a month." Abigail rang for half speed and watched tensely as a Cocopah shoved the tree aside. "Harry was holding down the same job on the *Western Star,* but got fired—"

"The *Western Star!*" Kimberly came closer, dark eyes glittering with excitement. "Now, it begins to get clear!"

"To you, maybe. Nothing is clear to me!" Then, Abigail bit her lip. "I —I don't want you hurt. And maybe that bullet was intended for you. If you'd only tell me why you're on this boat..."

"Abigail, I can't."

"Are you going to give me a reason why I should believe Harry Wolverton tried to kill you, and should be turned over to the Army for trial at Fort Mojave?"

"No," Kimberly answered, putting his hand on her arm.

She shook it off. "Then, for the last time. I'll give you an order. Obey it, or you're the one who's going to be reported to the Army at Fort Mojave —for interfering with a pilot. Get below and stay there!"

"All right," he agreed, his voice gentle. "I don't think there'll be any more trouble involving you—not for a day or so, at least. But if there is, I want you to have this."

Abigail felt steel against her fingers. She looked down in surprise at a small, compact two-shot derringer, the kind of weapon gamblers favored.

THEN, HE smiled and kissed her again, so swiftly she couldn't possibly evade it, and was gone, moving with the same silent speed he had displayed yesterday.

This caress had been only a slight brushing of his lips against hers, but the effect was the same. No matter how hard she gripped the wheel, she couldn't shake it off.

It was dismaying to discover that, after making herself tougher than most men could be, for this job of piloting a boat on the Colorado, she was only weakly feminine after all, with everything going rose-colored just because a man kissed her. And then, Abigail discovered she was wondering if this was so terrible. It was—well, an awfully nice feeling...

Perhaps she had been too harsh with Dick Kimberly. Snapping at a man was no way to persuade him to reveal the truth about himself. If she could only get away from this bucking wheel for a few minutes and act sweetly sympathetic with him, the way a girl should.

Abigail almost cried out in relief when Cap'n Ben came in.

"What in tunket happened?" he exclaimed, staring at the smashed window.

"Never mind," she told him, hurriedly shoving the derringer under her shirt. "Dad, there's fairly smooth water ahead. Take her for a few minutes?"

"Sure, honey," he agreed, moving to the wheel. "But I wanted to tell you something. There's a lot of talk below about the *Western Star.* Talk that a chest of Army payroll money was aboard, all in gold, and that river pirates wrecked the boat at Spaniard's Slough in order to grab it."

"That so?" Abigail said absently.

"Keep her in the middle of the river. I won't be gone long."

She hurried into the blazing hot sunshine. For a little while, her father could handle the wheel well enough. That should give her time to find Dick Kimberly and tell him the things bubbling up in her that his kiss and the touch of his hand had evoked. After that, he would tell her the truth about himself, and she would figure how she could help him.

Half way down the port ladder, Abigail suddenly gripped the handrail hard and froze. She was looking forward, along the deck. The door of Mrs. Lansing's cabin was open, and the black-haired woman, a silk wrapper about her opulent figure, was standing there. Dick Kimberly was in front of her, talking fast. Mrs. Lansing caught his hand and pulled him inside, slamming the door.

Abigail went up the ladder again. Dick Kimberly, she thought with numb bitterness, had soft words for any female who would listen. She took the wheel back from her father and signaled the engineer for full speed. She was in a hurry now to get this trip over as soon as possible.

IT WAS almost dark when the *Nonpareil* nosed into the bank and was tied up for the night. Abigail felt regret, even though her palms bore fresh blisters, put there by this long day of fighting the river's savage power.

Her father was chewing his lip worriedly.

"We got that crooked channel past Spaniard's Slough to think about soon," he said. "Maybe tomorrow. But if we get close, you'll tie up early, won't you, honey? You won't try to run it late in the day?"

"If I can see it, I'll run it," Abigail told him. "I'm tired of this crazy river and the people who travel it! Next trip south, we're going to get rid of the *Nonpareil* for what it'll bring, and head east. I want to be a lady and wear skirts—and be courted by a man who never saw a gun in his life!"

"We've got to get back to Yuma City in one piece first," Cap'n Ben said drily. "And I'm bothered enough about talk of river pirates, without the worry that a snag you can't see will rip the bottom out of the boat!"

"I've told you there are no pirates!" Abigail snapped.

Cap'n Ben shook his head stubbornly. "What's that Army major doing aboard? There's whispers he's taking more gold north to replace the money stolen off of the *Western Star* —that it's in a box marked plowshares. And some are laying odds the pirates know about it and will make a try for the gold, maybe at Spaniard's Slough."

"Fiddlesticks!" Abigail said impatiently. "I'm going ashore to get the kinks out of my legs. Tell Harry to bring my supper up to my cabin tonight."

THE VIOLENT gold and crimson of sunset still lingered in the west. A raw, chill wind was rustling through the greasewood and sage dotting the desert's immensity. Lamps had been lighted at the boat, dots of friendly light in this vast lonesomeness. The Mormons, jammed on the cargo deck with all their belongings, were singing hymns.

Abigail had walked quite a distance. Coming back, she felt again that queer wrench at her heart as she thought of leaving the Colorado. Maybe this land did something to everybody who lingered in it, even briefly; maybe it changed them so they could never be happy anywhere else.

By the time she reached the bank, it was almost full dark. In the day's last light, she saw a man speculatively studying the *Nonpareil*. It was the Army officer, Major Hardwick. Abigail turned toward him.

"Major," she said brusquely, "I've heard some talk that I don't like. Is it true you're in charge of Army gold that's hidden somewhere aboard the boat?"

She thought he would laughingly deny it. But he only stared at her for a long moment, a big man with rugged, domineering features whose uniform was a very tight fit. Perhaps to gain time before answering, he bit into a cigar and lighted it.

"And if I am, Miss?" he said at last.

"If you are," Abigail told him, "I want to know about it. There's talk that one boat has been wrecked for gold. I mean to keep the *Nonpareil* afloat."

Major Hardwick still held the match, as though to see her more clearly. "I've heard you are a smart girl," he said. "You can be of assistance. Yes, there is gold aboard. And I feel certain the bunch that wrecked the *Western Star* will try the same stunt against your boat at Spaniard's Slough."

"Let them try!" Abigail said. "I'm going past Spaniard's Slough at full speed."

"Good!" Major Hardwick approved. "And to make sure there's no interference this time, I'll be in the pilothouse when you do it. Now, you'd better go aboard."

Men were moving along the bank, footfalls sounding faintly in the thick darkness of this hour before moonrise. Major Hardwick turned, holding the match up to his face. Abigail suddenly heard a grunt, the sound of a blow, and a startled yell. A gun blasted. The Army man instantly dropped his match and vanished in the night.

The lights of the boat all at once seemed far away. Abigail started to run. She bumped into someone who gripped her shoulder with a startled exclamation, and tried to stop her. She twisted away, feeling her shirt tear. Another man piled into the one who had attempted to hold her, and both of them thrashed into the brush.

Abigail fell to her knees, got up and ran on. Someone appeared abruptly in front of her, clamping a hand on her arm. Abigail raked her nails across his face and he screamed, letting her go. She leaped down the steep river-bank, and a gun whiplashed above her head. She crashed through heaped-up flood debris and fell into the river. Snatching frantically, she got a handhold in matted brush and pulled herself out again.

There was fear in her now—and a sick dread. She had recognized the voice of that man who had tried to stop her when she had first started to run. It had been the voice of Dick Kimberly. And he had not been alone.

Perhaps the try for that Army gold wouldn't be made at Spaniard's Slough. Perhaps it was being made here, tonight, its first move the elimination of Major Hardwick—and with Dick Kimberly leading the river pirates.

THE ROAR of the river, the wind and the singing of the Mormons, had evidently drowned the sounds of that fight. Nobody on the boat seemed to have heard it.

Abigail went across the gangplank and onto the cargo deck. It was packed almost solidly, higher than her head, with boxes and bales, with wagons and farm gear and all the belongings of those who had taken deck passage north.

She could hear those deck passengers in the darkness, moving about, talking, settling themselves for the night. There were dozens of them. Abigail shivered, wondering how many might be waiting for the signal to loot the boat.

Moving into a thick pool of blackness between two high crates, she

settled to watch the gangway. A lantern on the cabin deck splashed faint radiance, laying a silvery pathway across the strip of water between boat and shore. The singing ended, and silence came to the boat.

The wind plucked with icy fingers at her wet clothes; after sundown the desert could be very cold. But Abigail waited, for what seemed like slow-moving hours.

At last, she heard someone hurriedly approaching. She shrank back and Mrs. Lansing, wearing a hooded cloak over her black and silver dress, passed by. At the same moment, Abigail also saw Dick Kimberly coming across the gangplank.

He was half-supporting, half-carrying a man who had a dark stain against his shirt. This fellow was one of the two who had come aboard with Mrs. Lansing. As they reached the deck, his legs buckled and he spilled to the planking.

Kimberly knelt beside him, and Mrs. Lansing bent down.

"I was watching from above and saw you coming," she said tensely. "Is he—badly hurt?"

"Bad enough," Kimberly answered, his voice strained. "He can't stay down here. We'll have to get him up to your cabin."

"Of course; I'll help you," the woman said. "What went wrong?"

"Everything!" Kimberly said bitterly. "We guessed wrong; Hardwick didn't go ashore alone. Or maybe he was followed. It could have been a meeting to get things set for tomorrow. Anyway, his men jumped us. We gave as good as we got, but it wasn't enough. He slipped away. Now, we'll have to try something else—"

"We? How many of us are left?" Mrs. Lansing asked unevenly. "Three men boarded this boat at Yuma City to help me. One came down this evening with river fever, and is shaking so hard he's useless. Another has a bullet in him. That leaves only you, Dick."

"Yes," he said quietly. "And I don't know how I'll bring it off alone. But I've got to do it. Help me now, Eugenia. Get one of his arms about your shoulders."

They moved awkwardly away, across the deck.

Abigail hugged herself for warmth, trying to make sense of what she had heard. Somehow, it seemed fantastic that Mrs. Lansing could also be involved in a plot to raid Army gold. But Abigail reminded herself that Mrs. Lansing was very clever. It was a quality one woman could recognize instantly in another.

The increasing chill drove her up to her cabin. She undressed and rubbed herself down with a rough towel before climbing wearily into her bunk. It seemed apparent nothing was going to happen tonight. And she had to rest before taking the *Nonpareil* through the wicked, twisting passage which began at Spaniard's Slough...

THE RIVER seemed quieter next day, and there was less floating debris. Abigail made good progress all through the morning, holding the boat to mid-channel and driving ahead at full speed. She relinquished the wheel only at noon for a few minutes, to swallow a cup of coffee and eat a little boiled beef and cornbread which Cap'n Ben brought her.

The day wore swiftly on. Checking landmarks—a wide bend in the river, volcanic cinder cones along the skyline on the California side and bluffs beginning to rise on the Arizona side—she knew they were going to reach Spaniard's Slough at least an hour before sundown.

Cap'n Ben came in shortly after three. "Wood's getting low, honey," he reported. "Don't you figure we'd

better tie up and give the boys plenty of daylight to fill the box?"

"We're going on as long as there's light," Abigail told him. "There's a good stand of willows a dozen miles north of Spaniard's Slough. The boys can get in their axe-work tomorrow."

"You'll have bad light for running that passage," Cap'n Ben protested.

"If we stop now, it'll have to be on the California side," Abigail said. "Once through the passage, we can stop against the Arizona bank. And if there's anybody waiting at Spaniard's Slough, they can't get at us unless they can swim the Colorado, which doesn't seem likely."

Cap'n Ben grunted. "You've heard that talk about river pirates, too!"

"I've heard even more than you have, Dad," she admitted. "Maybe it means something, maybe not. But I think the *Western Star* went into Spaniard's Slough with somebody beside the pilot at the wheel, because thieves were waiting there to take off the Army gold she was carrying. And the boat was driven ashore and burned so they would have plenty of time to lose themselves in the desert. That's not going to happen to our boat!"

Her father nodded, jaw tightening.

"Not if we can help it!" he snapped.

"It doesn't seem likely the same thing would be tried twice at the same place," Abigail went on, "but that could be reason enough for them to do it."

CAP'N BEN nodded. "You drive the boat through, honey," he said. "What you want me to do?"

"Get a gun and watch the port ladder, on the cabin side," Abigail told him. "Post somebody you can trust at the starboard ladder. Don't let anybody come up to the texas. Except Major Hardwick, that is."

Cap'n Ben stared at her. "What's he got to do with it?"

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"He's in charge of the gold. Send him up here."

"I can't," her father said quietly. "I didn't want to tell you, Abigail, because you've got enough to bother you. Major Hardwick didn't show up for meals today, and his bunk wasn't used last night. I figured he was robbed by one of those hardcases on the cargo deck and thrown in the river. And I wanted to keep it quiet until we reached Fort Mojave."

Abigail felt coldness strike through her. She had made a mistake last night. She should have waited for Major Hardwick and assembled a party, with lanterns, to look for him when he didn't reappear. He was obviously the one Kimberly had been hunting.

"Mr. Kimberly is aboard?" she asked unevenly.

"Oh, sure. He's down on the cabin deck, watching the river—"

"And the California bank, too, I'll bet!" Abigail said bitterly. "He's keeping his eyes peeled for the men posted to come aboard at Spaniard's Slough!"

"He's mixed up in this?" Cap'n Ben said incredulously. "A nice fellow like him?"

"Dad, go put a gun muzzle against his back. Lift that Navy Colt he's carrying and lock him in his cabin. Hurry!"

Cap'n Ben nodded and left.

SOME TIME in the past, probably during a year of heavy floods, the Colorado had broken from its bed and poured through a desert canyon to cut a dozen miles of new channel. At a sharp bend, the water must have piled up against those high bluffs on the Arizona side, so that some of it had spilled into a sink in California to form Spaniard's Slough.

It was a shallow, stagnant lake which the Cocopahs believed was haunted by evil spirits; they muttered uneasily among themselves whenever the boat passed it.

Now, as it began to appear on the *Nonpareil's* port side, with the westering sun blood-red above the bleak and lifeless desert hills beyond, Abigail gripped the wheel hard. She had seen the *Western Star*, driven up on the bank just beyond the entrance to the slough.

It was canted drunkenly on its side, with its superstructure burned away. And between it and the river were a dozen mounted men. As the *Nonpareil* approached, they strung out along the bank. Abigail shivered; they reminded her of waiting vultures.

Hurried footsteps sounded. Abigail saw Harry Wolverton. The steward had a gun in his hand. And fresh scratches were gouged deeply into his face.

A man pushed Wolverton aside and came into the pilothouse. It was Major Hardwick, but he didn't look very military today. In rough desert riding gear, he seemed bigger than he had been in a tight-fitting uniform. There was black stubble on his cheeks, and a mocking light glittered in his eyes. He lifted a heavy Dragoon pistol from his belt and tilted it at her.

"If necessary, I can steer this boat into Spaniard's Slough, Miss, but I'd rather have you do it," he said. "Don't try to buck me now. The pilot of the *Western Star* did—and I put a bullet through his head—"

"I THOUGHT you were dead!" Abigail exclaimed.

"It suited me to have people think that," Hardwick said. "Also, that I was an Army Major." He turned his head a little. "Harry! Get those other two up here, fast."

Wolverton nodded, hurrying aft.

"Kimberly came confounded close to grabbing at me last night," Hardwick went on. "He probably intended

to hog-tie me for delivery to the Army at Fort Mojave—then grab my men, too. What he didn't know, was that I had set a meeting with them ashore to pass along instructions for today—"

"Then—Dick Kimberly isn't a river pirate!"

"He certainly isn't one of my bunch. I'd guess he's a lot more used to an Army uniform than I am. Start swinging toward the slough, Miss."

Abigail reluctantly obeyed.

"The match I lighted to guide my men showed him where I was, and I had to do some fast running," Hardwick went on. "Later, I slipped back aboard, shucked that soldier suit, and hid out on the cargo deck. With both ladders guarded, Wolverton had to get me up here by way of the paddle-wheel frame.

Wolverton was back. He fingered the scratches on his face.

"You've got claws sharper than any cat," he growled at Abigail. "Well, they're going to be trimmed mighty quick!"

She tried to understand. Kimberly had been right; Wolverton had tried to kill him. The steward must have been planted on the *Western Star* and then on the *Nonpareil,* just for something like this.

When she saw two more men on the texas deck, it became clearer. These were the two bearded ruffians who had tried to kill Kimberly at Yuma City. They were Hardwick's followers also, and must have been hidden out in that tangle of freight on the cargo deck.

"Swing more to port, Miss," Hardwick ordered. "Harry, her father is going to notice and come up to see what's happening. Bend a gun barrel over his head. Then, you and your two go after that chest in Mrs. Lansing's cabin. If she tries to bother you, handle her as you would any man."

"Sure," Wolverton grinned. "Then, I'm going to yank Kimberly out of

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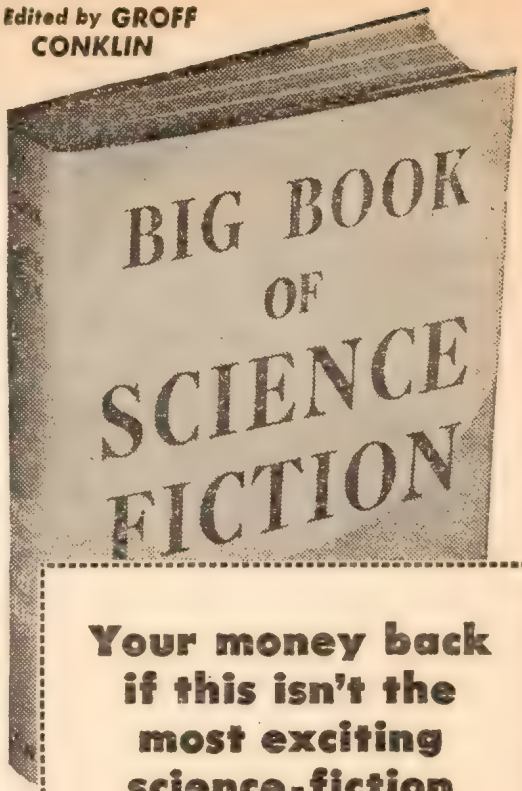

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his locked cabin. I've got a score to settle with that hard-handed bucko, too!"

"Handle him any way you please," Hardwick said indifferently. "I don't want him able to follow us when we ride away."

WOLVERTON left. Abigail gripped the wheel with suddenly damp palms. She remembered the heavy chest Mrs. Lansing's two men had brought aboard, and now the rest of it was clear—except the reason why the Army chose to ship gold north in this fashion.

But that didn't matter. The important thing was that Hardwick was the leader of the river pirates, and he was going to seize the gold, kill Dick Kimberly and wreck the *Nonpareil*, unless somebody found some way to stop him.

The river, pouring through that narrow canyon like a sluiceway, was running with tremendous force; she felt the trembling in the boat as the water battered it. Abigail drew a deep breath as she thought of the only thing that could be done, and she pretended to struggle hard with the wheel.

"The river's—too strong!" she gasped. "You'll have to lend a hand—"

Frowning, Hardwick took a step toward her. As he did so, she spun the wheel. Instantly, the *Nonpareil's* bow swung wildly, and the boat was forced sideways by the tremendous power of that raging current. It tilted down on the port side. There was a groaning of timbers and a tremendous crashing as everything loose in the ship slid to that side.

Caught in mid-stride and off-balance, Hardwick staggered wildly and slid down the pilothouse deck to crash heavily into the wall. Before he could recover, Abigail twisted the wheel in the opposite direction.

The *Nonpareil* lurched drunkenly to starboard, and Hardwick, with the deck sloping steeply away from him, came running across the cabin, arms windmilling, and slammed into the opposite wall.

Again, Abigail whipped the wheel to port, and the boat rolled violently the other way. Hardwick fell away from the starboard wall and crashed down on his back. He had dropped his gun, which slid toward Abigail. She kicked it into a corner.

People were yelling in fright, all through the boat. The *Nonpareil,* Abigail grimly knew, couldn't take such a violent wrenching very long; it would break up.

Wolverton came lurching across the deck to the door.

"Hardwick, both your boys got pitched down the port ladder—!"

Abigail whipped the wheel over again and Wolverton went back, twisting and sliding. He hit the rail and hugged it desperately.

Hardwick, who had lifted himself to hands and knees, rolled helplessly clear across the pilothouse and out through the door. Abigail saw him slam into the rail beside Wolverton.

SHE STARTED to straighten the boat out, heart in her throat as the river fought to swing it broadside. The *Nonpareil* came around sluggishly. The entire cargo deck must be awash, she thought.

Spaniard's Slough was very near. Hardwick's men ashore were yelling. Their guns began to roar.

Hardwick recovered and started toward her. Abigail turned the bow sharply to port another time and drove him back down against the rail.

Then, she saw someone appear at the head of the port ladder. A shirt had been almost torn away from a brown, muscular chest, and blood was smeared across his face from a cut

on one cheek. It took Abigail a moment to recognize Dick Kimberly.

He smiled grimly in her direction and leaped at Hardwick, who left the rail and crashed into him, fists, elbows and boots all flailing wickedly.

Abigail held her breath, holding the boat steady now. She had to maintain its balance with delicate precision, do nothing that would endanger Dick.

Neither man had a gun. Hardwick's was on the pilothouse floor, and Dick's had been taken from him by her father. Strength and skill would determine this fight, and she cried out as a blow from Hardwick drove Dick back. But he recovered and slammed into the river pirate again.

Then, Harry Wolverton started sidling up to the two big men. He had a gun, tilted and cocked, and he was trying to swing around to where he could get a clear shot at Kimberly.

Abigail belatedly remembered the two-shot derringer Dick had given her. She lifted it and fired hurriedly. Glass broke as the bullet smashed another window, but Wolverton had not been hit. She hastily thumbed the other hammer and breathed a frantic prayer and pulled trigger again. This time, the steward yelled in pain, dropped his gun and clamped a hand over his right arm.

As Wolverton fell back against the rail once more, Hardwick abruptly sagged, both hands dropping momentarily. A pile-driver fist against his jaw had badly shaken him. Dick Kimberly moved in fast, giving him no respite. Hardwick went down. He did not get up again.

KIMBERLY stepped back, brushing his thick brown hair out of his eyes. Others were hurriedly coming up the port ladder, Cap'n Ben in the lead.

"Mrs. Lansing just spoke to me, Lieutenant," he said. "I'm sorry we

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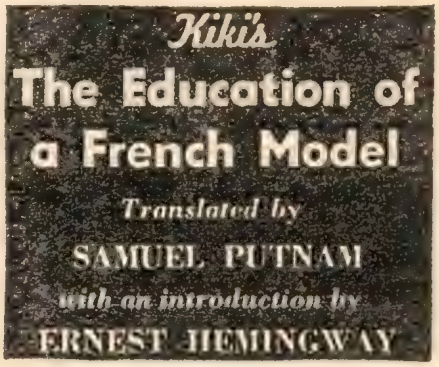

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had you figured so wrong."

"That's all right now," Dick told him. "And I'm not a Lieutenant—not since last week. You'll take care of these two?"

"They'll be tied so tight they can't wiggle a finger," Cap'n Ben promised grimly. "And I'll have the door of the cabin they're stuck in guarded. The way you busted down yours, and then pitched into those two hardcases who came sliding down the ladder when Abigail rolled the boat on its side, was something to see. But I don't want it repeated—not by this bunch."

Dick Kimberly nodded, entering the pilothouse. "Swing her as close to the east bank as you dare, Abigail," he directed quietly. "There's still some danger from that bunch on the bank."

Abigail nodded, obeying. Dick put his elbows against the sill of the window on the port side whose glass she had just smashed. Abigail watched him, a tightness in her throat.

Guns were beginning to speak from the boat. This was Cap'n Ben's doing, Abigail thought. And the men ashore were beginning to break, scrambling into saddle and spurring away.

"There's a cavalry patrol out in the desert; they'll be picked up," Dick said quietly. "But we wanted Hardwick alive. And we've got him. I'm sorry we had to be so mysterious about our scheme to trap him, Abigail—"

Mrs. Lansing rushed in. There was a happiness mirrored in the dark-haired woman's features which made her very beautiful. She came to Kimberly, hands outstretched. "Dick, it's all over! And we've won...."

"Sure, Eugenia," he said gently. She was in his arms; he held her close and kissed her on the cheek.

Abigail looked away. The boat was past Spaniard's Slough now and into the canyon. A dozen of the most dangerous miles on the Colorado lay ahead, and it would need all of her piloting skill to get through them safely.

THEN, THEY were alone again and Dick came to stand beside her.

"I'll tell you the rest of it—" he began.

"You shouldn't interrupt me at a time like this," Abigail interrupted unevenly. "Please go below."

He laughed, putting an arm about her.

"You've given me enough orders, darling. Now, I'm giving you one. Keep quiet—and listen!"

She stared at him, startled, seeing again the dancing light that had been in his eyes when he first kissed her.

"The officer in charge of the Army gold on the *Western Star* was my best friend, Captain Harry Lansing," he went on. "He's in the hospital at Fort Yuma now, with three bullet holes in him. He'd have to face a court martial if the matter wasn't cleared up. The only way to avoid that was to catch those who had robbed and shot him."

The pressure of his arms increased.

"So," Dick continued after a moment, "although I had already resigned my commission, I undertook to do that—with a chest full of bar lead, two sergeants who were granted leave to help—and Harry's wife, Eugenia."

Abigail gasped, stiffening. The words drummed in her head. Dick wasn't romantically interested in Mrs. Lansing. He never had been.

"We let word leak out that the Army was trying to send more gold north secretly, hidden in a woman's luggage. That there was unrest among soldiers in the northern forts because they hadn't been paid, and Ford Yuma was too short-handed to detail an officer for the job. When those two hardcases tried to get rid of me at Yuma City, I knew our scheme was working. And when Hardwick came aboard in his fake Major's uniform,

with that story of just having arrived from Santa Fe, I guessed the kingpin of the thieves himself was aboard—"

"But I nearly ruined everything for you!" Abigail protested miserably.

"IF IT HADN'T been for what you just did, we'd have lost," Dick reminded gently. "The odds were four to one against me. You cut them down so I only had to deal with Hardwick."

"And you're not an Army officer?"

"No. I wasn't cut out to take orders."

"I've found that out!" Abigail laughed.

"This is a big, growing country," Dick said slowly, "and I want to grow with it. Maybe I'll become a riverboat man. Would you teach me what I need to know, Abigail?"

"I'll have to think about that," she said demurely. "A man needs sharp eyesight to do river work. And you couldn't even tell it was me taking that bath in Yuma City...."

"Couldn't I?" he murmured. "An officer is also supposed to be a gentleman. And what's more gentlemanly than to pretend a lady is a man, when she's surprised in her bath?"

"Dick, you knew!" Her cheeks were flaming.

"Abigail," he said firmly, "it's past time for me to kiss you—"

"No! I've got to watch the river—"

"Hush, darling. I'll watch it."

She closed her eyes, then, and relaxed against his strong arms, and felt his lips claim hers in a kiss which made the ones which had gone before seem pale by comparison.

It was going to be wonderful, teaching Dick the river all the way up to Callville and then back to Puerto Ysabel. It wouldn't be a hard chore. He was a man who could go anywhere and do anything he wished.

And she would be beside him.

THE END

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CURLEY BILL

By Charles Recour

IN THE chronicles and annals of the Tombstone, Arizona of 1879, that year is a quite eventful one. The famous Wyatt Earp came to Tombstone then officially as Deputy United States Marshal. His brothers—James, Morgan, Warren and Virgil—were right behind him. The infamous Doc Holliday drifted into town at about the same time.

The stage was set for exciting events. The long record of murder, bloodshed, revenge and hatred began with an apparently innocent happening one evening.

On November 6, 1880, Curly Bill Brocius was cutting up with a bunch of friends. This means that they were loaded to the ears and were shooting into the air with vim and vigor. Some of the citizenry didn't take kindly to this sort of celebration. They sent Fred White, who was then sheriff of the town, out to quiet the boys.

Curly Bill dashed into an alley. Here, Fred White and Virgil Earp—sort of an assistant—cornered him and asked him to surrender for disturbing the peace, and to give up his pistol.

Curly Bill reached out to hand the gun to Fred White, but at the same moment Virgil Earp slipped up behind him and threw his arms around him. Frightened, Curly Bill accidentally fired, and Fred White slid to the street—dead.

The trial was hot and furious, but Virgil Earp testified that in a way he had been responsible for the unfortunate shooting. And Tombstone citizens, knowing that to be a sheriff was to invite an early grave, acquitted Curly Bill.

He blew town after this and was rarely seen thereafter in Tombstone. He ended up as a notorious rustler and horse-thief—suspected—but never actually nailed. Out of the whole mess, the only temporary good that seemed to come was that Virgil Earp was elected to fulfill White's term.

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THE SKYPILOT OF TOMBSTONE

By

Merritt Linn

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE to talk about Tombstone, Arizona without talking about badmen. Gunmen and killers infested the town and gave it a history that will forever be told when tales of bloodshed are wanted. Tombstone had a bad side—that is certain.

But there is another aspect to the fighting frontier town that is worthy of repetition Tombstone had plenty of civilized intelligent, law-abiding citizens, too, and even among the gambling badmen we find traces of a strange humanitarianism.

Consider the case of Endicott Peabody. He was an Episcopal minister straight out of a strait-laced Boston Seminary, determined to set the world on fire. And he chose Tombstone, Arizona as the place to do it.

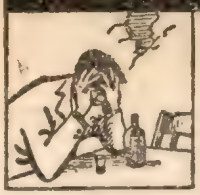
He was twenty-four when he entered the town, full of energy and ideas. Almost at once, he started to round up a congregation. He associated with everybody, federal and county officials, miners, the limited society element, cowboys, saloon keepers, gamblers—anyone. He made himself known and, as he was excellent mixer and conversationalist, he was soon spoken of around town as a "fine preacher." He was not afraid to go anywhere. A famous incident related about him is the time when he dropped in to visit a poker game held at the back of the hotel, and calmly proceeded to ask for funds to help build his new church.

That was about the last place you'd expect a minister to solicit funds. But Endicott Peabody didn't rely on convention. The minister watched the poker game for a while without eliciting any apparent response. He watched the poker game closely, wondering at the sight of some of the pots which frequently had as much as two thousand dollars in them.

At the end of one particularly rough hand, Gage, who was superintendent of the railroad at that point, calmly reached over and handed the minister two hundred and fifty dollars. Peabody nearly fell over. Then, the real shock came. Every man in that room reached out and matched the superintendent's gift. "Build yourself a church," the superintendent is reputed to have said. "There's the cash!"

After profuse thanks, Peabody left, and the church he built along with the congregation he assembled, still stands as a marker to his courage, faith and integrity.

DRUNKENNESS



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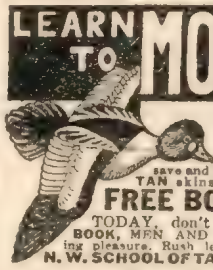

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THE FLYING HORSEMAN

By Thomas Walker

A WIRY LITTLE French-Canadian who looked to weigh an even hundred pounds, strode into the Fonda Hotel in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on August 18, 1854. A group of admirers immediately surrounded him, welcoming him back from his long journey. Then Major Weightman entered the room, and the crowd moved toward the bar as the congratulations were exchanged. The little man and Weightman each ordered brandy.

"What's become of your paper, Major?" asked the little guy, after raising his drink to his lips and then putting it down.

"Dead," answered Major Weightman.

"Yes? That's too bad. What killed it?"

"Lack of support."

"You really should have said the lie it told on me killed it," was the sharp retort.

The scene grew tense, and a sudden silence fell over the room. Major Weightman's facial features turned the color of dirty slate; his cheek muscles jerked, and he stepped forward to hurl the amber-colored liquid into his accuser's eyes. The blinded man made an attempt to draw his gun. Major Weightman swiftly pulled his knife and stabbed him. The little man gasped and dropped to the hotel bar room floor where he died almost instantly.

The small French-Canadian who met such a tragic sudden end was Francois Xavier Aubrey, a Santa Fe trader and champion horseman. He made the greatest ride recorded in history when another famous horseman, Buffalo Bill Cody, was a small boy.

Francois Aubrey came to early St. Louis and worked in a carpet shop. Lured by glowing tales of the Southwest spread by those in the Santa Fe trade business, Aubrey moved on to Independence and joined one of the trading outfits. Very little time elapsed before he himself became an independent trader.

Aubrey, filled with a zestful energy peculiar to a man of his size and build, seemed to always do things just a little sooner and faster than his competitors. After making several trips, he became well known throughout the West. Before Francois Aubrey had burst upon the trading scene, the trip to Santa Fe on horseback from Independence required from twenty to thirty days, and it was believed almost impossible for traders to make two trips in a season; although it was being done once in a while. Aubrey came to the conclusion that he could reduce the time and possibly make three trips across the plains during a season.

His first record trip was started on December 22, 1847 from Santa Fe, accompanied by five horsemen and his servant. In the mountains outside of Santa

Fe, the party was attacked by Mexican bandits, who got away with ten of his mules. Undaunted, Aubrey raced down the trail leaving the five men in a cloud of dust. Even though Aubrey was detained for two days along the trail, the five horsemen couldn't keep up, so they dropped out. Aubrey and his servant passed Fort Mann in the night. Sixty miles outside of Council Grove, Kansas, his servant gave out, and he went on alone. He arrived at Independence on the 5th of January. The eight hundred mile trip had taken only fourteen days; actually it was performed in twelve days when the two days he was detained are not counted. It was stated in the press as being the quickest ride on record from Santa Fe to Independence up to that date.

By March 16, he had gotten together an exquisite stock of goods and left for Santa Fe. This was the earliest a wagon train had ever dared to set out, and many were the predictions of failure passed around.

THE EXPEDITION reached Santa Fe after a goodly length of time, and Aubrey sold out completely. Even though starting out so early had been rather expensive, he made up for it by beating his competitors to the market.

Aubrey left on horseback from Santa Fe on May 19th—killed three horses and two mules, walked forty miles, was destitute of provisions for three days, slept just four hours and a half, and arrived at Independence before sunrise on the 28th. Eight days and ten hours. He had averaged 150 miles per day. The little man was inexhaustible. He had beaten his first record by almost six days.

Sometime later, back in Santa Fe, Aubrey's business again compelled him to make another hurry-up trip to the States. It is said that he bet a large sum of money (various sources say $1,000—others say $5,000) that he could beat his second record. In fact, he named the time limit as six days. The bet was promptly covered.

Aubrey sent men ahead of him to stand by with relay horses. He was making the trip alone. On the morning of September 12, he leapt into the saddle and dusted down the trail to the far-off States. At Las Vegas, a distance of seventy-four miles, was his first change of steeds. He changed again at Point of Rocks. Aubrey's heart hit the bottom of his anatomy when he reached the next relay station, for the Indians had killed his man and drove off the horses.

On he sped to Cimarron, 150 miles from Point of Rocks. Here there were three fresh horses. He mounted one and drove the other two ahead of him. The last of the three broncs gave out as he neared the

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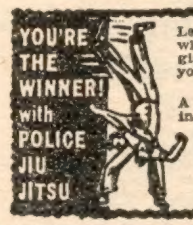

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Arkansas River. He hid the saddle and blanket in the tall grass off to the side of the trail, then alternately walked and trotted for twenty miles until he reached "Aubrey's Crossing" on the Arkansas. There, a fresh horse awaited him.

Five days and sixteen hours after leaving Santa Fe, Aubrey was lifted off of his horse in Independence. The saddle was caked with blood, and his voice was so hoarse that it was barely audible. It was the evening of Sept. 17. On this trip, he had killed six horses, walked twenty miles, and slept two hours and a half; but he set a record that has never been surpassed by anybody anywhere.

He was engaged in freighting for several more years, and during this period he became acquainted with Major R. H. Weightman, who was editor of the *Santa Fe Herald*. The two men became close friends. Then, exploring the country between Santa Fe and southern California, Aubrey discovered a much better route than the ones in use at this time. Another man had trailed Aubrey and had witnessed the discovery. Speeding back to Santa Fe ahead of Aubrey, he himself proceeded to claim the credit for discovering the new route. Somehow, he induced Major Weightman to publish an account of the discovery in the *Herald* proclaiming him as the discoverer.

Aubrey was furious when he learned of the fraud, and hurried back to Santa Fe. He rode his horse directly to the front of the Fonda Hotel, dismounted, and rushed inside like a mad hornet. A short time later he was carried from the premises horizontally. The tireless, venturesome Francois Xavier Aubrey was finally slowed down to a complete stop, but his feats in horsemanship will never be forgotten.

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The disgusted passengers soon abandoned the Sitka for a faster method—walking—and arrived in Sacramento several days before the steamer. The Sitka took, for the usual 20-hour run, some 6 days and 7 hours. —*June Lurie*

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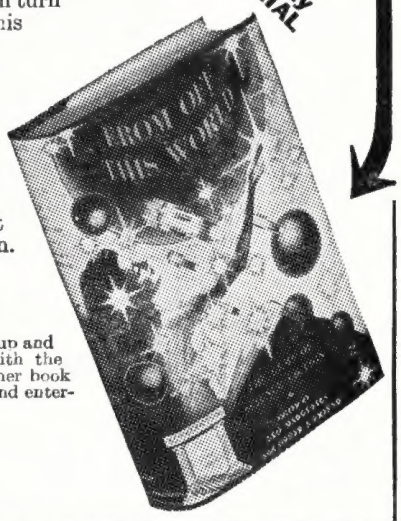

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